

REJUVENATING THE RENAISSANCE SONNET: WRITING IN A WOMAN'S VOICE

by

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ABSTRACT

By looking at the female authored sonnet-letter in Shakespeare's *All's Well, That Ends Well* (1603) and Lady Mary Wroth's 1621 sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, this thesis contests Arthur F. Marotti's claim that "by about 1600 collections of love sonnets ceased to be written in England" and therefore "died" as a form (Marotti 396). By closely examining the poetry— on the level of form, language, and imagery— as well as the cultural climate it was written in, this thesis considers how the sonnet form was changed by the introduction of the female sonnet speaker, and how contemporary readers of this new voice, namely Edward Denny and Ben Jonson, received and reacted to these changes. In doing so, my purpose is to show that the love sonnet did not die, but gained new life with the introduction of the female voice.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Although we know we love, yet while our soule
Is thus imprison'd by the flesh we wear,
There's no way left that bondage to controul,
But to convey transactions through the Ear.

— Katherine Philips, 'To my Lucasia, in Defense' (Appelt ix)

At the outset of his 1982 essay, "Love is not Love': Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order", Arthur F. Marotti claims that,

It is a well-known fact of literary history that the posthumous publication of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* inaugurated a fashion for sonnet sequences in the last part of Queen Elizabeth's reign...but this extraordinary phenomenon was short-lived...by about 1600 collections of love sonnets ceased to be written in England: it was as though a genre (or subgenre) had died. (396)

These sorts of statements are created to be challenged, and indeed various authors and critics have contested them, including Bryan Boyd, Steven Burt, and David Mikics, among others. My goal is to challenge the idea of the death of the love sonnet by considering the introduction of the female voice into the love sonnet through sonnets attributed to female characters constructed by both a male author, William Shakespeare, and a female author, Lady Mary Wroth, and to look at how the female voice within the sonnet was received by male contemporaries.

My argument is influenced by Rosalind Smith's essay "Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*: The Politics of Withdrawal" (2000), in which she discusses and challenges a recent critical tradition of associating *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* with limits on the early modern woman's "textual agency" (R. Smith

408). Like Smith, I believe that female writers' textual agency was not as limited as we have often believed, nor was the history of women's writing as unique as we often think. Smith states,

By 1621, Mary Wroth...had available to her a whole tradition of women's secular writing of lyrics and texts which present precedents for the construction of the female speaker or subject. The wide spread circulation in print of sonnet sequences attributed to Mary Stuart were supplemented by Elizabeth I's Petrarchan poetry, circulated in manuscript and print, the Continental tradition of women's sonnet writing, and a tradition of the complaints written by men and women. (R. Smith 415-6)

However, while I admire Smith's effort to put Wroth into a larger context and tradition of female writers, Mary Wroth is not a queen, and England is not the Continent. Josephine A. Roberts claims, "Lady Mary Wroth composed her prose romance *Urania* at the height of the Jacobean debates concerning the nature and status of women" (Roberts, *Urania*, xv). Although Roberts remarks only on the writing of the *Urania* in this statement, Wroth's sonnets were written at the same time as well, and participate equally in this debate; therefore, Wroth's work, due to both timing and content, plays into this debate. Thus, with Smith, I agree that

Wroth's unfashionable circulation of the sonnet sequence as late as 1621 registers more than a disenfranchisement from current courtly fashions in favor of a Spenserian nostalgia for Elizabeth's reign; it actively seeks political, religious, and textual purchase on a range of public and private levels by reworking those tropes in a Jacobean context. (R. Smith 431)

While I concur with R. Smith that Wroth's sonnet sequence participates in the sonnet tradition with a new political and religious agenda, my goal is to build on Smith's argument by showing that Wroth was not alone in her effort to bring the female voice into the love sonnet tradition; therefore I will look at the development of female subjectivity for female sonneteers/sonnet speakers. While Wroth is very much a participant in the sonnet sequence tradition, the introduction of the female voice does demand changes, especially given the cultural climate. R. Smith insists that the critical emphasis on "withdrawal" (409) and "the private" (431) in the sonnet results in a suggestion of a lack of agency. I argue, however, that privacy and withdrawal are an important part of discovering agency for Pamphilia, Wroth's female protagonist and the speaker of the sonnet sequence. Additionally, since the privatization is done within a sonnet sequence that is both circulated and later published, it is an ambiguous sort of privatization, or a very public privatization.

This idea of publicizing the private makes it also useful to address the sonnet that appears in William Shakespeare's 1603 play *Alls Well, that Ends Well*, instead of addressing his sonnet sequence itself; since, as Paul Edmonson and Stanley W. Wells claim, "The ideas and themes found in the Sonnets, as well as their poetic form, can be discerned in many of Shakespeare's plays" (95). In the play, a young woman named Helena is in love with a man, Bertram, whose superior class puts him out of her reach. Helena is a woman of gumption however, and she actively works at gaining Bertram's hand in marriage. While she is successful in becoming his wife, she is not immediately successful in gaining his love. In fact, to escape her, he heads off to war, and she, as a result, works to bring him back safely (while still attempting

to earn his love). Within this context she writes a sonnet-letter to her mother-in-law, the Countess. While Shakespeare's sonnet sequence and the sonnet in the play are connected by their shared conventions, it is useful to address a sonnet in a play because the drama literally provides a public staging of a private genre of writing. The play uses the sonnet in somewhat the same way as it uses soliloquies, and for this reason it is valuable to look at. It is also a logical choice since, although Shakespeare reworks the traditional sonnet conventions in many ways, the speaker of the sonnets in his sequence is always male. Brian Boyd claims,

In his sonnets Shakespeare accepts the sonnet form, with all its more or less fixed elements (line length, line number, metrical pattern, rhyme pattern), the sonnet sequence, with its predetermined subject of love, and sonnet imagistic conventions, of hyperbolic comparisons and favoured content, such as eyes and hearts— but he also challenges every feature. (32)

Shakespeare challenges the sonnet form in various ways, including bringing the formerly unattainable love object off of her pedestal (Sonnet 130), and having sonnets spoken by an older man and addressing a younger man instead of a woman (Sonnet 20); however, one thing he does not change is the gender of the sonnet speaker. In *Alls Well, that Ends Well*, on the other hand, the character who authors the sonnet is female. Shakespeare presents a heroine, Helena, “whose eloquence surpasses that of all the male characters, and who deploys that eloquence in order to establish her own and, by extension, other women's discursive authority” (Belton 125). This chapter considers both the positive and problematic nature of ventriloquizing the female voice— what it meant in early modern England to give a

woman a powerful voice and pitiable position, and yet, underneath it all, the actor was still male, and the original writer, Shakespeare, also male.

In the second chapter discussion centers on the first female, English love sonneteer, Lady Mary Wroth. Wroth is an interesting figure for many reasons, one being that she was the niece of Sir Philip Sidney, the originator of the English sonnet sequence. She wrote her own sonnet sequence, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, published in 1621. The Petrarchan sonnet is often seen as exceedingly masculine form, and the early modern period as an extremely patriarchal time. Therefore, in order to find a platform from which to write, women had to write against this established patriarchy. Mary B. Moore notes that this was not an easy venture: “In poems that a female voices— whether “author” is the fictive poet, Pamphilia, or Wroth herself— the tension between form and syntax at least suggests the difficulty of fitting female erotic experience into forms created to suit the shapes of male erotic desire” (Moore 126). Smith, on the other hand, points out that,

While the Petrarchan lyric, the sonnet sequence, and the complaint were all genres which, when viewed as exclusively male-authored traditions, encoded specific gender ideologies that problematized the woman author’s direct assumption of their speaking positions, they were also all genres appropriated by the woman subject using a variety of strategies. (R. Smith 416)

Natasha Distiller also studies Wroth as a figure who wrote a sonnet sequence that “engage[s] with and develop[s] Petrarchanism in English poetry” (Distiller 2). Like other English sonneteers, male and female, Wroth challenged Petrarchan

conventions, not only because her poet figure, Pamphilia, is female, but also through the very form of the sonnet itself. Within her sonnet sequence, Wroth writes a variety of sonnets in the Petrarchan style, but she also writes sonnets that, formally, are more Shakespearean/English in style. This sort of a study shows how Wroth was challenging Petrarchanism even at the level of form. Generally, Wroth's challenges to Petrarchanism— like her challenges to the formal elements— are rather subtle: Pamphilia does not take an assertive role, except in the act of writing, but instead stays a rather helpless and dejected figure with a “martir'd...hart” (Sonnet 1 {P1}, line 12). What is important for this essay, however, is that she also clearly establishes herself as a lover: “O mee: a lover I have been” (Sonnet 1 {P1}, line 14). Wroth keeps the tradition of the love sonnet alive through Pamphilia, but she also develops it, revealing the female side that had previously been ignored. Wroth, more than the male Shakespeare, risked the conflation of herself with her speaker, Pamphilia¹. Yet the two were nonetheless also distinct, and so we must always be careful not to conflate them. The voice of Wroth's female sonneteer is just as much constructed and imagined as Shakespeare's Helena is. Thus, by looking at the male construction of a female voice before looking at a female construction of a female voice, I begin to put together a tradition of the construction of female sonneteers.

In discussing the poem that appears as my epigraph—by a poet who actually post-dates all the poets I examine—Ursula Appelt notes,

Katherine Philips's image of 'transactions through the Ear' (154) figures poetry as an exchange that suspends speech while employing it; channeling

¹ Shakespeare risked this type of conflation with his speakers as well, and we often look to his plays to find his voice and/or fill in blanks of bibliographical information.

words not through the mouth, the suspect organ of female speech, but through the ear, the receiving organ of speech, enables women to communicate through poetry as a form of female speech, while simultaneously acknowledging its transgressive and evasive nature. (Appelt ix-x)

In tracing the voice of the female sonneteer as it develops in the works of William Shakespeare and Lady Mary Wroth, my argument develops the idea of the construction of a female voice that embraces public and private in both authors. As Appelt says of Katherine Philips, so I say of Shakespeare and Wroth: poetry gave them a space to develop the female voice in a public way that was safe because it was not oral—although Helena is the author of the sonnet in *Alls Well*, it is read aloud by a male steward, and while Pamphilia is the sonnet speaker, her speaking happens through writing. As well, I trace the development of female subjectivity in the figure of the female speaker/sonneteer, and imply that as agents of their own desire who prove their capacity for love and act on it, the female poet figures I discuss subvert masculine Petrarchan conventions of the passive/aggressive male sonneteer. In beginning with Shakespeare and then moving on to Wroth, I trace the careful steps that the development of the female voice in the love sonnet took, asserting that a male playwright and a female poet were both capable of valuing the active, desiring female voice—a voice that otherwise risked becoming simply that of a “public” woman, or what some would call a whore.

As a way of addressing the risk Shakespeare, and especially Wroth take in writing this type of female voice, chapter three considers contemporary responses

to the female voice in the sonnet. It presents two diametrically opposed opinions on Wroth's poetic skill, both presented in the form of poems, from Edward Denny and Ben Jonson. Edward Denny wrote a scathing poem to Wroth in reaction to the publication of her prose romance, the *Urania*, entitled "To Pamphilia, from the father-in-law of Seralius". The poem reacts to and acts as evidence for the nature of doubling in early modern writing. As well, it reveals a view of female writers that corresponds with the apparently prevalent opinion that outspoken, public women were monsters or whores. This chapter pays special attention to Jonson's response to Mary Wroth's sonnet sequence, which takes the form, appropriately, of a sonnet. Jonson is an interesting figure, not only because of his standing as a public writer and perhaps the first literary critic, but also in relation to the sonnet form itself. Some claim that he did not like sonnets (William Drummond), while more recent critics claim that while he may have disliked them, "Jonson did not dislike sonnets so much that he abstained from writing them" (Riddell 194). This is true; perhaps he did not like them, but he did still write them, though very few. It is significant then that he chose to write at least two fourteen-line poems to Mary Wroth praising her as a poet. "A Sonnet to the Noble Lady, the Lady Mary Wroth" claims that after reading her sequence Jonson became both "A better lover, and much better poet" (Jonson, "A Sonnet to the Noble Lady", line 4). By looking at Denny and Jonson's responses, it becomes clear that Wroth's contemporaries were as capable of appreciating her poetic skill in constructing a female voice as they were capable of collapsing her with her creation and condemning her as a whore. Additionally, this chapter considers the changing role of the poet, in terms of the development of

literary criticism, and it includes a discussion of the differences between writing for public performance and writing the sort of staged public privatization that has been of interest in throughout.

By tracing the appearance and growth of the female voice in the love sonnet tradition, I hope to show that instead of dying out as Arthur Marotti suggests, the love sonnet took on new life when it began to make room for the figure on the other side of the love relationship— the woman. I wish to approach this more as a cultural study than as a feminist one, since, like Smith, I acknowledge that there was more going on in the world in terms of female sonneteers, but the debates surrounding these women were different depending on the cultural situation. Stephen Burt and David Mikics note, “In the sixteenth century, women poets took up the sonnet avidly. In Italy, Gaspara Stampa and Vittoria Colonna wrote memorable sonnets, as did Louise Labé in France” (Burt and Mikics 13). Why, then, was there a delay in England, and resistance when the female voice did appear? Labé was able to “metamorph[ize] gender assumptions inherent in Petrarchism” (Moore 94). That she was able to do so may speak more to cultural reasons than anything else— the literary scene in France was perhaps not quite as conservative as England’s. Despite Smith’s desire to put Wroth in a wider literary context, which would include women writers on the Continent, her geographical location made a difference in terms of her social and cultural context. Petrarchism was still entrenched in early modern England. This is partially what makes Mary Wroth such an important figure to discuss in terms of the love sonnet sequence. Elizabeth Hanson examines two

definitions of culture given by Wendy Griswold. The second definition defines culture as

“an *activity*...the sum of a society's current vehicles of expression, constituting a web of clues, a text, a set of data; through the interpretation of culture, one may understand much about the social arrangements prevailing. This view often takes account of the circumstances of production and distribution, the filters and channels that allow some forms of expression to come into existence and not others” (Hanson 166).

Hanson goes on to argue that, to this end, “Wroth’s poetry is quite literally crucial; providing information about what happened at the intersection of aristocratic femininity and a dominant literary mode it is neither more or less significant than that complex intersection between Petrarchism and aristocratic masculinity so brilliantly occupied by her Uncle Philip” (Hanson 167). Weaving together Shakespeare, Wroth, and Jonson is my way of creating “a web of clues” in an attempt to construct a picture of why and how the female voice was able to enter the public world of poetry, and why this change was vital for the future of the love sonnet sequence.

CHAPTER 2: Marriage Gained, Love Unattained: The False Female Sonneteer in Shakespeare's *Alls Well, that Ends Well*

"Since Shakespeare's time, poets have written sonnets on many subjects...but Shakespeare's initial audience thought of sonnets, most often, as love poems"

- Brian Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last*

It is quite reasonable to claim that William Shakespeare is the most famous poet and playwright to come out of the English Renaissance, or the early modern period, at least in retrospect. He is also still one of the most famous English sonneteers, so famous, in fact, that we refer more often refer to the English sonnet as the Shakespearean sonnet, despite the fact that many other writers used the same form— ABAB CDCD EFEF GG— before he ever did. Many literary critics consider 1580-1600 to be the time the sonnet form was in vogue – Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* was published in 1591, which would be during the height of the sonnet's popularity— so it seems that Shakespeare was a little late to the game, his sonnets being published in 1609. This fact reinforces the idea that the sonnet form did not die out as quickly and completely as has been suggested. In fact, instead of dying out, the sonnet underwent various reinventions, and Shakespeare was one of the greatest reinventors.

As my epigraph notes, love was still the most common theme associated with the sonnet. While he does address other themes, Shakespeare stays true to the theme of love in his sonnets, but he does it in his own way. Sonnets had, and still have, a long history, even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and this history was impossible to get away from; as Edmondson and Wells describe, although Shakespeare "disassociat[es] himself from convention...[he] nevertheless is indebted to previous practitioners" (15). Writers, then, both participated in the

history and added to it. One of the many reasons the sonnet sequence may have gone out of vogue by the seventeenth century, as has been suggested, is that it became far too conventional; perfect, unattainable women with eyes like the sun were old hat, and after Elizabeth I passed on, the reasons for idealizing them in this way were less relevant (which also implies that sonnets always had a political nature as well, something I do not contest). However, Shakespeare found a way to take these old, over-used conventions and breathe new life into them.

Shakespeare addresses his sonnet sequence to two different figures: “we take the first 126 sonnets as ones concerning a young man, and the rest as ones concerning a dark-haired and dark-eyed woman” (Vendler 14-5). The sonnets to the young man feature a speaker who is an older man. These sonnets provide wisdom gained by age, a commentary on aging, and, according to some critics, a type of homoerotic passion, infatuation, or love.² Whether or not there is an element of homosexual love presented in this section of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, addressing the sonnets to a young man instead of to a woman is one change Shakespeare makes to the sonnet tradition. The other big change, in terms of who the sequence is addressed to, is to present a female love object who is in direct contrast to the conventional beautiful, fair, and angelic model of Petrarch’s Laura or Sidney’s Stella. His mistress’s eyes, he writes in Sonnet 130,

...are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

² The young man sonnets also pose an interesting connection with Mary Worth, who is the subject of Chapter 2, since her cousin-lover, William Herbert, is one possible candidate critics have offered as the real identity of the young man, known only by his initials W.H.

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go –
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
 And yet by heaven I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare. (Sonnet 130)

Every line of the three quatrains of this sonnet directly addresses the history and convention of the love sonnet, and yet, while he has done something wonderfully new in this poem, Shakespeare remains true to the tradition. In the final couplet, he swears by heaven that, despite taking his lover right off the conventional pedestal and planting her firmly on earth, his love is still rare and true. In his dark lady sonnets Shakespeare has attempted to present a woman who is real, one his contemporaries and readers could imagine actually existing. In fact, as Brian Boyd notes, “In the Mistress sonnets he creates so well the illusion of himself engaged with a real woman who arouses his mingled love and hate, his desire and disgust, that readers and scholars for two hundred years have searched for real-life models” (Boyd 73). Yet, I believe, his interest is more in writing a sonnet that acknowledges and plays with sonnet conventions than about a “real” woman.

According to Helen Vendler, in Sonnet 130 his “mock-blazon has sometimes been thought misogynistic, in part because readers have formed their idea of it from its octave, where nothing positive is predicated of the mistress” (Vendler 557). Many critics believe that Shakespeare represented women in a negative way,³

³ Mary Beth Rose’s “Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare?” or Catherine Belsey’s

though, in his plays, critics have debated whether Shakespeare was a misogynist or a proto-feminist. Perhaps neither of these labels is entirely accurate; after all, Shakespeare was a writer who produced an impressive number of works, both poems and plays, which cover a variety of styles and themes. His plays alone can be categorized into histories, tragedies, tragicomedies, romantic comedies, and romances. He wrote during the reigns of two very different monarchs, Elizabeth I and James I. Within his plays Shakespeare is a clear commenter on his culture, his society, and his world. As his sonnets reveal, while he participated in the traditional conventions available to him, he was also willing and able to remodel them to suit new purposes and to test new ideas. The focus of this chapter is the ventriloquization of the female voice, specifically that of a female poet, in his 1603 play *Alls Well, that Ends Well*.

Shakespeare was by no means the first or the only playwright to ventriloquize the female voice— indeed, drama is a ventriloquist’s art—, nor was *Alls Well, that Ends Well* the first play to incorporate a sonnet into its dialogue— we can recall, for instance, the sonnet in *Romeo and Juliet*— but *Alls Well, that Ends Well* is interesting and unique in several ways, which make it worth noting and worth bringing into a discussion about the revival of the love sonnet and the introduction of the female sonneteer. *Alls Well, that Ends Well* is one of the less popular

"Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies" both shed further light on Shakespeare’s representation of women.

Shakespeare plays⁴, perhaps partially because it is often considered to be a failure. But why is it a failure? Or, perhaps the better question is, is it a failure?

In many ways it resembles various other Shakespearean romantic comedies, but *All's Well, that Ends Well* is rather darker, and much less amusing. Many consider the ending of the play, in which Bertram finally agrees to settle down with his wife Helena, as “puzzling, unsatisfactory, [and] even bungled;” however, Roger Warren notes that Shakespeare’s “own personal poetry, in the Sonnets, sheds an interesting light on exactly why he [Shakespeare] thought the play ended well,” as the title suggests (Warren 79). Warren, along with other critics, has pointed out apparent connections between the play and Shakespeare’s sonnets, and indeed it is possible to see these connections. Michael R.G. Spiller explains that “the speaker of the *Sonnets* is a victim of the rhetorical devices Shakespeare has used to create him, very much as might be said of any character in the plays” (Spiller 6). Helena, then, as the speaker of a sonnet and as a character in a play, is victim of the rhetorical devices of both forms.

Helena is deeply in love with Bertram, right from the beginning of the play, despite the fact that he is quite unattainable due to their different positions in society, and she approaches this love as conventional sonnet lovers do— by putting her love up on a pedestal. Throughout the play Bertram is shown to be far less wise

⁴ Sheldon P. Zitner, in the Introduction to *Twayne's New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare: All's Well That Ends Well*, remarks, for example, on its “paltry stage history” (Zitner xviii), and Gary F. Waller calls it “an unjustly neglected play” in “From ‘the Unfortunate Comedy’ to ‘this Infinitely Fascinating Play’: The Critical and Theatrical Emergence of *All's Well, That Ends Well*” (1).

and far less ideal than the picture Helena paints of him. Her first soliloquy reveals her view:

There is no living, none,
If Bertram be away. 'Twere all one
That I should love a bright particular star
And think to wed it, he is so above me.
In his bright radiance and collateral light
Must I be comforted, not in his sphere.
The ambition in my love thus plagues itself:
The hind that would be mated by the lion
Must die for love. 'Twas pretty, though a plague,
To see him every hour, to sit and draw
His archèd brows, his hawking eye, his curls
In our heart's table – heart too capable
Of every line and trick of his sweet favour.
But now he is gone, and my idolatrous fancy
Must sanctify his relics. (1.1.86-100)

We can agree with Warren that “Helena’s first soliloquy plunges us into that uncompromising obsession with her beloved that many of the Sonnets show” (81). Helena’s view of Bertram is very clearly that of the sonnet-lover; the initial line in this passage reveals its connection to the sonnet convention of dying for love, and the idea of love as a plague, a trial for the lover to endure. The lover as an unreachable star brings to mind Sir Philip Sidney’s lover figures, Stella and Astrophil, whose names mean ‘Star’ and ‘Star-lover’ respectively. Helena even presents a blazon, a catalogue of some of Bertram’s features that she loves: “His archèd brows, his hawking eye, his curls” (1.1.96). Helena’s act of using a blazon is intriguing, since in a typical Petrarchan sonnet, some critics argue, the blazon was a way of dismembering and therefore establishing a sort of control over the subject being dismembered (Vickers 234). The question of whether or not Helena is using the blazon in the same manner as other Petrarchan poets, that is to scatter and

therefore control Bertram, is interesting. Throughout the play, in Helena's attempts to win Bertram's love, it is apparent that she has no control over Bertram. Despite her use of the blazon in her poem, she cannot establish control over him except with the help of the King, another male figure. This reveals the tensions present in a form that in itself is so staunchly ground in patriarchy but is being employed by a female figure. In addition, the soliloquy reveals a flirtation with idolatry towards the beloved, a connection that critics like Lisa M. Klein have analyzed, wherein "the utter helplessness of the poet-lover before his mistress is analogous to the reliance of the sinner on the grace of God" (Klein 31), which in this case takes the form of Helena sanctifying Bertram's relics (1.1.100). Despite not fitting the formal requirements of a sonnet, this soliloquy is clearly connected to the sonnet tradition.

Soliloquies function as a way to reveal internal feelings and struggles a character is facing; they bring us outside of the action of the play and into the interior of the character. Sonnets function in a similar way, being a written, and therefore passive form of presenting emotions and struggles. Helena's sonnet letter is passive in the sense that, while it presents the voice of a female poet, this voice is transmitted through the filter of a letter, and then through the filter of the male steward who reads it aloud. These filters make the sonnet more private by removing the physical presence of the female poet while still maintaining her voice. However, the unique result of putting a sonnet into a play is that the words do not simply remain stationary on the page; instead, they become causes of action, and part of the action. And indeed, the rest of Helena's actions— healing the king, leaving the Countess, faking her death, going to Italy, the bed trick, and so on— are all done in

an effort to gain Bertram's favour. Through her words Helena personifies the definition of love Shakespeare gives in Sonnet 116:

Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken. (2-6)

Helena is steadfast in her love; she does not waver when she is denied, time and again by Bertram. After her soliloquy, and her statement that she will continue to "sanctify [Bertram's] relics" despite the fact that she has been separated from him, it is clear that she fits into the sonnet convention. However, while her words may sound conventional, her actions, which result from the feelings presented in her words, are not, since, traditionally, the speaker in the sonnet sequence has turned to poetry as the only possible outlet for his or her dreams and desires; what they want is beyond possibility in the real world, so the fantasy world of the poem is the only place dreams can come true.

By contrast, Sonnet 88 presents us with a representation of love that allows us to view Helena's actions in the tradition of the sonnet-lover: "Such is my love, to thee I so belong,/That for thy right myself will bear all wrong" (Sonnet 88). While the usual sonnet-lover might issue such statements and leave it at that, Helena puts this sentiment into action. As Clifford Leech notes, Helena "does indeed risk much to win her aim. She has to endure Bertram's first refusal, his danger in the war, his mother's loss of him, his infidelity. All ends well, but before that the house at Rousillon knew much trouble" (Leech 24). We will see how Helena's own sonnet represents the same sonnet convention of dying for love that we saw in her first

soliloquy (1.1.86, 1.1.93-4). Leech also states that “the love of Helena is not presented to us in an altogether sympathetic way, and that should not surprise us. Professor Lawrence Babb has shown how ambivalent was the Elizabethan attitude towards love. It was at once the fine feeling of courtly lovers and a sickness that needed a cure” (26). By putting a sonnet into the action of the play and developing a love story around it—especially in the soliloquies— Shakespeare is able to show us both sides of the Elizabethan opinion of love— the “fine feeling” and the “sickness”—simultaneously. As well, viewing the sonnet from the play in the context of other sonnets by Shakespeare allows us to see Helena putting her statements of love— which echo statements of love from other sonnets— to the test, showing us that they are not just words for her, but truths she will act upon and live by.

By comparing Helena’s sonnet with Shakespeare’s, we can see that the play makes very interesting suggestions about the status of women. Catherine Belsey discusses how “Shakespearean comedy can be read as disrupting sexual difference, calling in question that set of relations between terms which propose as inevitable an antithesis between masculine and feminine, men and women” (167). In order to show this disruption, she describes the typical place of the female in early modern England, using examples from other Shakespearean comedies:

The place of the woman in the dynastic family is clear and well known, and is perfectly defined in Katherine’s final speech in *The Taming of the Shrew*: “Such duty as the subject owes the prince/Even such a woman oweth her husband” (5.2.156-7). Sovereignty in marriage precisely resembles sovereignty in the state, and both are absolute. Men, Luciana explains in *The*

Comedy of Errors, “are masters to their females and their lords”(2.1.165).
(173)

Belsey also notes that “At the end of each story the heroine abandons her disguise and dwindles into a wife” (187). Belsey is referring to the plays she addresses in her chapter, including *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Comedy of Errors*. She does not address *Alls Well, that Ends Well* at all, which is interesting, since it is doing something quite different from what Belsey has described. In fact, *Alls Well*, it seems to me, displays the opposite phenomenon; instead of Helena dwindling into a wife, Bertram gives up and gives in— Bertram dwindles into a husband.

At the start of the play Bertram seems to personify the ideals of the society Belsey describes. He appears to command and silence his mother. In 1.1, Bertram responds to his mother in such a way as to reveal his patriarchal leanings: “as a woman, she [the Countess] is not important, her feelings and her life are treated as of no consequence, while his [Bertram’s] father, and the King, are significant to him” (Marsh 14). The play opens with a farewell scene as Bertram prepares to head to court. The Countess is mourning his loss as if it were a death; Bertram responds by saying,

“...I in going, madam, weep o’er my
father’s death anew; but I must attend his majesty’s
command, to whom I am now in ward, evermore in
subjection. (1.1.3-6)

His father’s loss is important to him, and so are the King’s requirements and his own situation, but he does not acknowledge his mother’s pain and loss now of both her husband and son. It is LaFeu who comforts her by saying, “You shall find o the King a husband, madam” (1.1.7). In addition, depending on the editor, either Bertram gives

no response to his mother after she says farewell⁵, or he responds with the rather cold statement, “The best wishes that can be forged in your thoughts be servants to you” (1.1.75-6).⁶ Besides these cold comments, Bertram seems hardly engaged in the conversation that makes up the first part of 1.1 at all. He inquires as to what is ailing the King, and when told, simply states, “I have not heard of it [the disease] before” (1.1.35). His next statement is to demand a blessing from his mother before he departs. Lafeu responds to this by stating, “How understand we that” (1.1.60), a murky statement that has been interpreted to be “a veiled rebuke” in response to Bertram’s “callow” and “impatient” demands (Snyder 217). The presence of this rebuke, as well as the fact that it is questionable whether or not Bertram even acknowledges his mother’s farewell, reveals that his mother’s emotions and feelings are not terribly important to him.

As Bertram attempted to silence his mother—the degree to which he was successful aside—so he also attempts to silence Helena, but “Helena successfully resists Bertram’s attempts to erase her existence or at least to deny her independent agency through a strategy that relies on her alliances with other women” (Belton 132). In fact, the moment Bertram exits the stage, Helena breaks out in soliloquy, which greatly emphasizes the fact that she certainly will not be silenced. In addition to this, “She establishes her own discursive authority by demonstrating her mastery

⁵ This appears in Nicholas Rowe’s edition of Shakespeare’s plays, which was published in 1709, as well as in subsequent editions.

⁶ Susan Snyder uses this interpretation, claiming that, while “Rowe and subsequent editors understood this speech as addressed to Helen, along with 1.1.77-8...the radical shift this supposes from courtly compliment to something approaching an order is unlikely, and the likelihood of some wish from Bertram to answer his mother’s blessing also supports Nicholson’s conjecture that Bertram speaks first to his mother” (Shakespeare, *Alls Well*, footnote p. 83).

of imagery, rhetoric, and poetic form” as well as by her actions (Belton 127). Helena’s sonnet is the culmination point of her mastery of poetic form and, interestingly enough, she addresses the sonnet to the Countess, Bertram’s mother, and not her beloved. Spiller, in his study on the development of the sonnet, notes that Shakespeare “almost always writes sonnets addressed to the beloved” as part of his “sonnet strategy” (Spiller 170). This uncharacteristic move of Shakespeare’s, then, suggests to me that the play itself resists the cultural norm by displaying strong, articulate females and the powerful bonds between them.

Throughout the play there is an emphasis on “Helena’s rhetorical skill” (Belton 127). Her abilities as an orator are revealed when she successfully convinces the king to let her try her hand at healing him, and are also seen within her poetic language. Helena seems to be fully aware of the roles her society expects her to play and is therefore able to manipulate them, using her rhetorical skill to disguise what would otherwise be seen as unnatural acts. According to Nicholas Marsh,

She [Helena] has been every variety of female stereotype by turns. She has puffed him [the King] up with her weakness, scolded him maternally, used the voice of God, excited him with witchcraft and forbidden sexuality: in short, she has flattered and bamboozled him beyond his knowledge. What can she do to rebuild his confused masculine self-assurance? How can she boost his ego? The answer is, of course, that she asks for the one thing all women are supposed to want: a good husband. (Marsh 92)

Marsh's statement here seems to present the idea that Helena is using the tools at her disposal to her own end, but does this imply that she is simply a character who represents all the female stereotypes, albeit in their best lights, or does she somehow manage to get beyond these stereotypes and portray a different kind of woman than those traditionally seen in Elizabethan England? The likely answer is that she is both.

Belton argues that "Helena uses language to compel belief in her own worth and ultimately to propose a new form of verbal authority, one that reacts with, but also reformulates the conventional terms of presumptively masculine discourse" (126). Helena's public statements, as opposed to her private soliloquies, are all very carefully considered. After all, as Christina Luckyj notes, 'Such cacophony [women speaking] was considered not only irritating but also dangerous, since it threatened the order of the household and ultimately of the state" (45). Perhaps this is why, within the play, Bertram is resentful towards being Helena's husband; after all, she chooses him, and he, as a male, is supposed to be the figure in charge. But Helena, as noted, is careful. She makes it so the King feels that he is ultimately in charge of choosing her husband for her, thus restoring the "order of the...state".

Regardless of the order of the state, it is still Helena who is the central lover figure in this play, and so it is she, not any male character, who writes a sonnet:

I am Saint Jaques' pilgrim, thither gone.
Ambitious love hath so in me offended
That barefoot plod I the cold ground upon
With sainted vows my faults to have amended.
Write, write, that from the bloody course of war
My dearest master, your dear son, may hie.
Bless him at home in peace, whilst I from far
His name with zealous fervour sanctify.

His taken labours bid him me forgive;
I, his despiteful Juno, sent him forth
From courtly friends, with camping foes to live,
Where death and danger dogs the heels of worth.
He is too good and fair for death and me;
Whom I myself embrace to set him free. (3.4.4-17)

As in the usual style of Shakespearean sonnet, the poem features an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme, with the volta appearing at the very end of the sonnet, in the final couplet. Helena makes it clear that she is willing to sacrifice her own life, and “embrace” death, in order to save Bertram, a man whom she, as the adoring sonnet lover, sees as “too good and fair for death” (3.4.16), despite the fact that almost every other character in the play, Bertram’s mother included, see him as an “unworthy husband” (3.4.26). Helena’s apparent self-sacrifice is complicated in more ways however. We know that Helena is deeply in love with Bertram and would, therefore, do anything for him, including die for him. On the other hand, we also know, from earlier on, that Helena has a master plan that she is unfolding in order to make Bertram her own. We know that she is determined and bold, and so, despite her declaration through her sonnet that she will embrace death to save his life, we may also assume, with some comfort, that Helena has another trick or two up her sleeve. Some critics have seen Helena as a devious and calculating social climber⁷; however I think it is much more obvious that she desires to be Bertram’s wife because she is truly in love with him, not for the improved social status. Shakespeare may have chosen to incorporate a love sonnet into his play in order to emphasize that love is Helena’s motive.

⁷ M.C. Bradbrook’s *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry*, or E.M.W. Tillyard’s *Shakespeare’s Problem Plays* both offer this type of argument.

It is obvious that Helena expresses similar sentiments within the sonnet as she does in her soliloquies, further tying the sonnet in to her inner dialogue. However, this sonnet does not stay in the realm of the written word. It is both spoken and acted upon, which is much more than what we ever see in other sonnets or soliloquies. At this point it is also worthwhile to consider the importance of names. Helena's name brings to mind a Helena of an earlier Shakespeare play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; there, another Helena is also hopelessly in love with a man who does not return her affection. In the end he does, but it is once again unsatisfactory since it is the result of magic and not a true change of heart. Early on Helena decries her position:

Fie, Demetrius!
Your wrongs do set a scandal on my sex:
We cannot fight for love, as men may do;
We should be woo'd and were not made to woo. (2.1.239-41)

The namesake of *A Midsummer's* Helena has now become a wooer who fights for her love. The Helena in *Alls Well* has learned to manipulate her position so that in the end she gets her object of desire. Within the play she is an actor in all senses of the word, contrary to the old proverb "*Fatti maschii, parole femine* – 'Women are words, men deeds'" (Luckyj 45). On the opposite end of the spectrum we can think of Bertram's foolish friend Paroles, who lives up to his name and is all words and no deeds. With these two characters *Alls Well* gives us a complete reversal of the traditional roles.

In terms of stylistic elements this sonnet is not particularly remarkable, which is not unexpected. Boyd acknowledges,

in his best sonnets, Shakespeare makes the poem in part a hide-and-seek game, and therefore very different from the verses in his plays. There, characters who spoke in a sonnet as tightly patterned as this would sound highly artificial, and in any case most of the effects would be lost on audiences without the time to focus attention as closely as a sonnet-reader can. (Boyd 51)

Yet, there are still remarkable features about Helena's sonnet-letter, one being the fact that Helena addresses it to her mother-in-law, and not to Bertram. Bertram is in many ways the ideal addressee for the Petrarchan sonnet: he never praises Helena as the sainted lover the Countess sees her as, not even in the end; a sonnet addressed to him would fall on deaf ears and a stony heart, whereas the Countess is a receptive audience. Bertram's response is fitting for the sonnet tradition, since the love object is typically an unattainable figure and Bertram is unattainable in several ways: his class puts him out of reach (until the King changes that), he puts himself out of reach by heading off to war (a barrier that is overcome when he returns thinking Helena is dead), and his heart is out of reach because he simply does not love Helena (and this change is the only one we are uncertain as to whether or not it has been overcome). Bertram's final statement that he will "love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (5.3.316) comes with the condition that first Helena must prove clearly that the ring she now possesses belonged to him and that the child she is apparently pregnant with also belongs to him. The words themselves, in addition to the "if" clause prefacing them, reveal a love that is nowhere near as deep or sincere as the

love we have seen Helena display towards the clearly undeserving Bertram throughout the play.

The sonnet appears in the form of a letter, read aloud by a steward, and what is remarkable about this is that it shows Helena as a sonneteer, not just a poetic speaker. Within the sonnet, Helena also encourages the Countess to “Write, write” (3.4.8). In fact, this phrase is repeated by the Countess shortly after (3.4.29), which further strengthens the connection between the two women and their valorization of writing.⁸ Letters play a significant part in *Alls Well, That Ends Well*. Much news is communicated through them. Additionally, letters are traditionally seen as a private sort of communication. They are associated with the domestic sphere and are therefore once again an acceptable medium for women to be writing in. Letters are associated primarily with the female characters in the play. I have already discussed the importance of both Helena and the Countess using the phrase “Write, write,” but the link between women and writing is strengthened by the fact that it is almost always the women who are seen writing, delivering, or responding to the letters sent throughout the play. There are nine occasions throughout the play in which lines or stage directions mention either Helena or the Countess in possession of letters (2.2.59, 2.4.1, 3.2.1, 3.2.11, 3.2.45, 3.4.1, 5.1.18, 5.3.311), whereas there are only two instances of male characters reading or writing letters. Even further, Bertram mentions he has written the letters in a passive way (2.5.24), and the letter

⁸ It should perhaps be noted that the Countess’ direction to “Write, write” is issued to the Steward, a man, and so it is not she herself who is doing the writing. However, perhaps her ability to command writing brings to mind the idea of patronage, and the reality that a woman of her position could command others to write on her behalf.

that the King is seen reading is written by Diana Capilet, the young virgin Bertram thought he had seduced (5.3.139). This is important because, as Elizabeth Harvey notes, “few women actually wrote and spoke” (Harvey 5) during the early modern period.

All of the female voices we hear in all of Shakespeare’s plays are ventriloquized— that is, they are not true female voices, but instead are the work of a male author “fabricating” a female voice. We must also remember that, besides having a male author, all of Shakespeare’s plays were acted by males during the early modern period. In addition to this, while Helena is apparently the author of the sonnet-letter, it is read aloud to the Countess by a male character, the Steward. This further complicates the ventriloquization of Helena’s female voice. Is this problematic? Or does it further reveal the complicated world Shakespeare was writing in, where the place of a female writer and poet was controversial and complex given that women were meant to be chaste, silent, and obedient, and the only writing women participated in was “nonfiction: translations, diaries, occasional poems, books of domestic or maternal advice, letters, and defenses of women” (Lamb 210). As well, does this ventriloquism prevent any true connection from being made between the women in the play?

To attempt to respond to these questions, it is helpful to consider the complicated role that letters played in the early modern period. Christina Luckyj says,

The paradox of [Catherine] Parr’s written recommendation of silence for women may rely on the fact that, unlike public speaking, writing was a

liminal mode: though mass production meant that it could potentially reach a wide audience, it was produced and frequently consumed in a private, silent space. (Luckyj 122-3)

As this quotation points out, letter writing is at once both a public and a private mode. Many letters were written with the intention of being published or of reaching a wider audience, not just the addressee, including many letters by women⁹. Margaret Ezell observes:

The definition of letters and diaries as “private” is very much the product of nineteenth- and twentieth-century experiences. For example, the whole concept of a “letter” was very different in the seventeenth century than in the nineteenth century. Letters were an established literary form in the Renaissance and seventh century and were not “private” in the sense of personal domestic correspondence. They were highly conventional public forms of address, “epistles” on weighty matters written to display the author’s rhetorical graces and intended to be circulated. (Ezell 34)

The liminal position that letters hold connects them to soliloquies and sonnets yet again, for soliloquies are monologues meant to present a private, interior self, yet they are delivered to a wider audience, and, “like a soliloquy,” a sonnet can paradoxically “present itself as interior discourse, all the while alluding to its public

⁹ There are a manifold of different female letter writers we can look to for examples here, including those written by now well known women like Anne Clifford and, of course, Lady Mary Wroth. There are also letters published anonymously, or with questionable authorship, including “A mothers teares ouer her seduced sonne” (1627), or “The ansvver of a mother vnto hir seduced sonnnes letter” (1627). The fact that the authorship of these last two letters is questionable is interesting, revealing what could be a case of fashioning a female voice for a political agenda.

performance" (Masten 84). Women, and women writers especially, occupied such a difficult space in early modern England since, "a woman who speaks in early modern culture can hardly be described as an independent being, if in speaking she enters male discourse only to be simultaneously labeled as a whore" (Luckyj 6). Having a figure such as Helena in a play allows her to speak her mind, through soliloquy, in safety; it allows her to be a female poet, especially since her poem appears in the allowable form of a letter; and it allows her to gain female subjectivity, through publication, what Masten terms "public/ation," of her words and thoughts, which, through a play "stage their own privatization" (Masten 83).

Another point of note in Helena's sonnet is the religious terminology and imagery used throughout it. Using religious language was a logical step for sonneteers to take; Anthony Low says, "Notionally, the highest allegiance of most men and women in the [early modern] period was to the Christian God; actually (as in other times) their allegiances might vary considerably from the professed ideal" (Low 1). Poetry presented a place to honour this "highest allegiance." Helena incorporates religious language into her sonnet over and over. Right at the outset she claims to be on a pilgrimage to St. Jacques. The notes of the play suggest two possibilities for what this might mean. The first is that she means, "Saint James the Great, whose shrine at Compostela was the most famous pilgrimage destination in Europe" (Snyder 152). The other possibility is "that Helena uses the pilgrimage only as a cover for her pursuit of Bertram to a different place" (152). It is easy to read the sonnet as implying that she is actually making a pilgrimage to Bertram himself, as the third and fourth lines claim that she is off to "amend" the "faults" her "ambitious

love has so...offended." This is not where the religious language stops either. Earlier in the play *Bertram* wrote to his mother these words: "Till I have no wife I have nothing in France" (3.2. 73); therefore, Helena determines, for the sake of Bertram's safety, that if she leaves, he will be willing to return. In lines ten and eleven of her sonnet, then, she states, "Bless him at home in peace, whilst I from far/His name with zealous fervor sanctify." This type of statement fits easily into the sonnet tradition. It is even possible that Shakespeare is reflecting the religious nature of Anne Locke's sonnet sequence, *A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner* (1560). In religious sequences the voice of the speaker does not matter as much as it does in love sonnets, perhaps because men and women alike show, or are supposed to show, God the same love and devotion. However, Shakespeare's choice to reflect this religious tone in his sonnet is interesting. Is he acknowledging Anne Locke's influence on the sonnet?¹⁰ It is unlikely. Is he reestablishing the association of women as writers of a devotional material— an area, along with letters, in which women's writing became more allowable? In all likelihood, he is simply playing on a convention long associated with the love sonnet; love sonnets regularly used religious language, including those by Petrarch himself.

As mentioned, *Alls Well, That Ends Well* is not the only play in which Shakespeare uses a sonnet within the dialogue. Another famous example is in *Romeo and Juliet*, at the moment when the two lovers first meet:

ROMEO If I profane with my unworhiest hand

¹⁰ While many scholars now acknowledge that Anne Locke was not only the first female sonneteer, she was also the first writer of a sonnet sequence in English (Burt 15). The reason she is not being discussed at length here is because Anne Locke's sequence is a reflection on Psalm 51, a religious sequence.

This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET Good Pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

ROMEO Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;
They pray – grand thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take. (1.5.93-106)

This sonnet is worthwhile to compare to Helena's sonnet in *Alls Well* for various reasons. In regard to the female voice, Juliet does speak in the sonnet, along with Romeo, but she is still the object of male affection. As well, religious terminology and imagery is also used throughout this sonnet, but where Romeo is the pilgrim and Juliet the saint in this sonnet, Helena is the pilgrim of her sonnet and Bertram the object she is sanctifying. Helena expresses her willingness to die for love, as per the tradition of sonnet-speakers, while Romeo and Juliet literally do die for love.

In several of the comedies Shakespeare has female characters disguised as males, but in *Alls Well, that Ends Well*, the disguising that takes place is of a different nature. Helena disguises herself as Diana, the poor virgin Bertram has become infatuated with and thinks he is going to sleep with. He instead, of course, ends up sleeping with his wife, which results in the fulfillment of the two requirements Bertram had to be a true husband to Helena, his ring and "a child begotten of

[Helena's body] that [Bertram is] father to" (3.2.58-9). Besides being completely successful in all her endeavors, Helena is a completely female figure—except for the fact that she would have been portrayed by a boy actor, her actions and words are never to be taken as those of a man: even when disguised she is female. Her poetry is a little more suspect, since while the play lets us know she is the author of the sonnet-letter, it is read aloud by a male steward. Yet the play's emphasis on keeping Helena female throughout helps the audience to see her as the poet as well.

"Representations of feminine speech that were current in literary and popular accounts, as well as in ventriloquizations," Harvey notes, "fostered a vision that tended to reinforce women's silence or to marginalize their voices when they did speak or write" (Harvey 5). *Alls Well, that Ends Well*, a play in which Shakespeare ventriloquizes the female voice to great effect, does not do what Harvey explains is the norm. It does not reinforce women's silence nor does it marginalize the female characters' voices. In fact, it emphasizes them. Perhaps this play does not reveal a satisfactorily happy ending, as some of the other romantic comedies do, but it certainly sets Helena up as a strong female figure: as Ellen Belton says,

In privileging the voice and the point of view of his heroine, the playwright deliberately accepts the challenge of imagining a female character's interior life [both through the soliloquies and through the sonnet] and endowing her with singular discursive authority. By means of her superior eloquence, Helena undermines basic assumptions about the antithetical relationships between masculine and feminine discourse. (138)

Because of this, Helena provides a strong foundation from which to continue a discussion of the female voice within the love sonnet. Through her powerful and poetic soliloquies and the unique presence of a sonnet in the play that is attributed to her hand, Helena opens up a place for a figure like Pamphilia, the creation of Lady Mary Wroth, to stand and present “a female character’s interior life” within the burgeoning tradition of the female sonneteer.

CHAPTER 3: Reading, Writing, and Self-Recognition: Mary Wroth and the Presentation of the Female Interior Voice

Christina Luckyj is critical of the fact that “It is almost obligatory for scholars who write about early modern women to begin with a nod in the direction of the triple feminine virtues of chastity, silence, and obedience” (Luckyj 3). I am left with after considering them is where female writing fits in. I am writing about the entry of the female *voice* into the love sonnet tradition, but of course this voice is not usually an audible one. The speakers of poems are silent speakers, men and women alike. Although a play, like *Alls Well, that Ends Well*, brings poetry into action and into the realm of the spoken word, even Helena does not speak the words of her poem within the play; instead, her sonnet-letter is read aloud by a male steward. Where then does writing fit? Luckyj calls writing a “liminal mode” (122), the sort of space that was not quite frowned upon, yet not quite acceptable.

“Generally...whether critics see Wroth in an acquiescent or rebellious relation to her culture, they concur in assuming that feminine silence in that culture is fixed and stable” (Luckyj 131). Among the critics Luckyj is referring to above is Helen Hackett, who claims that “Wroth conforms with seventeenth-century prescriptions of silence as a feminine virtue (52)” (134); however, Wroth’s own writing seems to call this claim into question. As Luckyj goes on to point out, “This assumption produces a Wroth who is either ahistorically capable of transcending her culture, or inevitably oppressed by it” (131). Wroth challenges all three of these over-emphasized virtues through her poet figure Pamphilia; writing offers Wroth a space of transcendence, not specifically for herself perhaps, but certainly for her female protagonist.

We can ask, as Jeff Masten does, “How did Wroth, writing in a culture which generally denied women a stable place from which to speak, negotiate the gendered positions of speech and silence to construct an emergent subject’s voice” (Masten 81)? Masten, along with many other critics including Margaret P. Hannay, Gary Waller, Josephine A. Roberts, Naomi J. Miller, Christina Luckyj, Nona Fienberg, Heather L. Wiedmann, and others, acknowledges that her personal history has the largest impact, putting her in a unique position in society from which she could make such moves. Mary Wroth was the daughter of Robert Sidney, Earl of Leicester. She was also the niece of Sir Philip Sidney, and Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke. Mary Wroth emphasized her connection to the Sidney family; Margaret P. Hannay goes as far as to say that “Wroth challenged gender conventions in her writing and in her life by positioning herself as a Sidney first and a woman second” (Hannay 1). This statement is contestable, since, arguably, Wroth writing as a Sidney would not have been such a challenge to gender conventions, but Wroth writing as a woman, a role she could take up in part *because* she was a Sidney, challenges gender conventions much more strongly. Either way, Wroth’s emphasis of the Sidney connection is made especially obvious on the title page of her romance, *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania*, where it says, “Written by the right honourable the Lady Mary Wroth. Daughter to the right Noble Robert Earl of Leicester. And Niece to the ever famous and renowned Sir Philip Sidney knight. And to the most excellent Lady Mary Countess of Pembroke late deceased.” The title of this work pays homage to Philip Sidney’s prose fiction *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (1598), and throughout the romance, and her sonnet sequence, which exists in a separate

manuscript and as part of the *Urania*, she uses character names that refer to Philip Sidney's sequence *Astrophil and Stella*. The name of her own title character, Pamphilia, among other references, pays homage to her uncle Philip Sidney and this title character Astrophil.

It is no surprise that Mary Wroth (née Sidney) emphasized the Sidney connection; as Marion Wynne-Davies acknowledges, "her genealogy offered a way in which she could complain against the injustices of the king and court, without endangering her honour" (Wynne-Davies 174). As well, her relatives offered her previous examples not only of literary styles, but also of "doubling":

Her uncle's sonnet sequence offered itself as a form of closeted romance, presenting himself as the spurned lover Astrophil, and Penelope Devereux Rich as his lady, Stella; her aunt's psalm translations encoded a powerful Protestant message intended to instruct as well as to please; and her father's rhymes simultaneously displayed and concealed his love for the still unidentified 'Lysa.'" (Wynne-Davies 174)

We can agree with Wynne-Davies that, "With this multiple inheritance of veiling devices, it is hardly surprising that in all of Mary Wroth's literary endeavors she reproduces this doubling process, this cloaking of personages and events, this familial allegory" (174). Of course, this cloaking, or doubling, is not too deeply disguised, which would become the cause of some controversy, as we will see in the next chapter.

While doubling was not something unique to the female writer, as we can see from the fact that both Philip and Robert Sidney used the device, it seems to gain a

new level of double-ness, perhaps even a re-doubling, with the female writer. Doubling and having allegorical figures was simply a part of Elizabethan writing, especially with patronage on the line, and especially since a large part of the writing came from members of the court. In other words, allegory could be a form of self-protection. However, as we have recognized already, women's writing offered a tricky position, and potentially a dangerous one, to women. At once it "served as both self-assertion and displacement for women" (Waller, "Mary Wroth", 53). Due to the emphasis on the patriarchal idea of women as chaste, silent, and obedient, writing provided a place where women could defy these virtues, which could possibly lead to their displacement within society. Wroth, however, was in a unique position both because of her genealogy and because of her position in court.

Lady Mary Wroth was married to Sir Robert Wroth on 27 September 1604, around the same time that *Alls Well, that Ends Well* was written and/or published. It seems not to have been the happiest of marriages—it was a marriage of political and monetary gains, not love, as most early modern aristocratic and gentry marriages were—perhaps because, "Unlike his bride, Sir Robert Wroth appears to have had few literary interests" (Roberts, *Poems*, 12). However, because of her husband's and father's favour at court, Lady Mary was, for some time, at the center of court activities, which included performances in a few masques by Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones, including *The Masque of Blackness* (12).¹¹ Sir Robert Wroth died in 1614 and

¹¹ In the first chapter it was stressed that women were not allowed to act on stage, and male actors played all the female characters, which further emphasizes the ventriloquization of the female voice. That Lady Mary Wroth would end up on stage herself, a few short years later—albeit in a very elite court setting, and in a non-

she was left with extensive financial problems, which she dealt with on her own, even as they continued to grow (22-3). Things grew more complicated when she had an illicit affair with her cousin, William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, to whom she bore two illegitimate children (24). Pembroke is often taken to be the inspiration behind the male title character in her sequence, Amphilanthus.¹² This affair, whether it was the result of true love or not, had social consequences:

Even in the licentious atmosphere of the Jacobean age, the scandal of illegitimate children would be likely to affect Lady Mary Wroth's standing as a leading court figure. In the years after her husband's death, beset with continual financial worries, she seems to have suffered a serious decline in social status. She was no longer a member of Queen Anne's intimate circle of ladies, nor was she invited to appear in masques or entertainments. (Roberts, *Poems*, 26).

This decline in social status and exclusion from the court, which may have resulted from the affair, as well as the affair itself appear to be two facts that heavily influenced the reception of her sonnet sequence when it was printed in 1621, despite the fact that, as Roberts notes, "As early as 1613," versions of the sonnet sequence "were being read in manuscript by her friends" (Roberts, *Poems*, 44).

speaking role— is both an ironic and fascinating turn of history which shall be addressed further in Chapter 3.

¹² I have said that critics assume Amphilanthus is based on the real life figure and lover of Lady Mary Wroth, her first cousin William Herbert, but in fact, as Roberts notes, while "Lady Mary Wroth provides a significant clue in the *Urania*...that Pamphilia and Amphilanthus are first cousins...[and] Only William would meet this qualification...it is important to note that Lady Mary provides few explicit indicators within the poems, in contrast to Sidney in the "Rich" sonnets of *Astrophil and Stella* (Roberts, *Poems*, 43).

Perhaps Wroth's feelings for Pembroke predated the affair, or perhaps she did not have a subject in mind when she first began writing. Either way, the clues seem to point to Pembroke as Amphilanthus by the time the sequence, along with the *Urania*, was published. While affairs were not uncommon, "Sexually independent women were regarded with great hostility in the period" (Waller, "Mary Wroth", 48), and a sexually independent woman who also chose to write would have been an anomaly as yet unseen in early modern England.

Fortunately for Lady Mary, she had somewhere to retreat to, and company to retreat with. According to Wynne-Davies, "Penshurst, like all familial houses, functioned as a place where noble women could find pleasure in one another's company without the darker and more dangerous intrigues of the seventeenth-century court....[I]t is then an environment particularly and exclusively for women" (Wynne-Davies 170). Penshurst became a "'feminine' safe house" not only for various women connected to the Sidney family, including Anne Clifford, Dorothy Percy Sidney, Isabella Rich, and Barbara Gamage, who all "were, had been, or would be excluded from the court and were thus compelled to use Penshurst as a 'safe' house in a very real way" (Wynne-Davies 171). All of these women were excluded for going against the norm of early modern society, in one way or another, and making independent choices. However, while Penshurst offered a sort of reprieve from the court, and her standing as a Sidney gave her the genealogical right to write, and despite these degrees of separation from her reading audience—residing outside of the court, belonging to such a family, and using the medium of a fictional

speaker— Mary Wroth still experienced negative reaction to the publication of her romance *Urania*.

While the *Urania* faced controversy of one sort, the accompanying sonnet sequence, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, has developed its own controversy. Josephine A. Roberts, in her introduction to *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, discusses how, “despite the early seventeenth-century fashion of ‘hard-lines’ and metaphysical wit, Lady Mary Wroth chose to reach back to a much older poetic model. Although her sonnet collection uses the voice of a female persona, the sequence contains many Elizabethan elements, especially in its structure, diction, and imagery” (Roberts, *Poems*, 41). Why would she revert to this “older” poetic model? There are several possible reasons. One is that she is consciously writing as the heir to her uncle’s literary throne and is continuing his legacy. Another could be that, as a woman and heir to her family’s literary history, especially her uncle’s, she is consciously writing back as a way to challenge, renew, or develop his monumental work. As Gary Waller acknowledges, “We have usually assumed that Wroth’s father and her aunt ‘encouraged’ her to write: the only evidence we have, however, is *that* she wrote” (Waller, “Mary Wroth”, 53). Did she have to write a sonnet sequence? Certainly not. But the fact that she chose to do so is intriguing.

Pamphilia and Amphilanthus appears in two manuscripts: “the first, now at the Folger Library, is a fair copy in the author’s hand, containing many corrections and revisions; the second text appears in a separately numbered section following the prose romance, *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* (1621)” (Roberts, *Poems*, 42). While the sonnet sequence and the prose romance are obviously connected—

they present the same characters— they can also each stand on their own. Within the *Urania* we read of moments when Pamphilia goes off to write—Pamphilia escapes to a garden and writes a sonnet in a “most straight and pleasant tree” (*Urania*, 92.31-14), and, at Amphilanthus’s request, she offers up to him “some verses of hers...in her own hand” (320.18-29)—, and presumably she is writing the sonnets that appear at the end. Without the sonnets the *Urania* is still a prose romance; without the *Urania*, the sonnet sequence is still a presentation of a woman’s interior life; together, they illuminate one another, the sonnets adding depth of feeling and passion to the *Urania*, and the romance adding a back story to the lovers whom we otherwise only know by name due to the title. After all, separated from the romance, Wroth’s sonnet sequence is quite different from her famous uncle’s:

Trained to mine the Riches of the biographically thick Sidneian sequence, to register Stellas, Astrophils, Shakespearean Wills, and Spenser’s three Elizabeths, we find within Wroth’s sonnets little reference to their writer, no mention of the beloved by name (except in the title), few allusions to contemporary events (in the old-historical sense), and little attempt to engage outside interlocutors. Indeed, these sonnets center exclusively on, and are the intense poetic efflux of, a persona who claims she is in love. As such, they seem to speak an almost inscrutable private language. (Masten 67)

Despite being closely connected to the long tradition of sonnet sequences, and to her family’s literary tradition, Wroth’s sequence is nonetheless somehow outside of both of these traditions because of its very private nature.

This idea of an “inscrutable private language” (Masten 67) once again brings into question ideas of public versus private, as we discussed in terms of letter writing in the first chapter. Natasha Distiller claims, “Wroth’s poetic speaker has to manage the contradiction of being both actively and publically desiring, as the Petrarchan form by definition inscribes, and a woman who merits admiration—mutually exclusive positions within this social and political framework” (Distiller 84). In order to balance these two contradictions, Wroth writes her sequence in this “inscrutable private language”—in fact, without the *Urania* we would have a much more difficult time unraveling the mystery behind the sequence, given its very private nature. Masten also discusses the public and private contradiction of the sonnet sequence. He notes how “Arthur F. Marotti has asserted that the sonnet sequence was a public courtly genre, circulating widely, expressing ‘social, political, and economic suits in the language of love’” (Masten 70). He goes on to say that “at the same time that these images [in Sonnet 1] place the fictional Pamphilia within the Petrarchan tradition, the sonnet also represents a withdrawal from public signification” (70). This “withdrawal” happened somewhat forcefully to Wroth herself, and in the *Urania*, we see Pamphilia withdraw from the company of others, by her own volition, and go off to read and write—at one point, for instance, Pamphilia “walked into a Parke she had adjoining to her Court” and “commanded her servants to attend her returne, her selfe taking a path which brought her into a delicate thicke wood, a book shee had with her, wherein she read a while” (*Urania*, 317.15-8). Like Helena’s soliloquies in *Alls Well*, the sonnets then act as a publication of private thought, masked by the doubling traditional in the sonnet genre. As

Masten summarizes, "If, returning to Marotti's conclusions, we agree that Wroth's chosen genre was otherwise relentlessly public...then *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* is a woman's privatization of that genre towards other ends" (76).

What then are these "other ends" that Masten claims Wroth is using her sonnet sequence to arrive at? Masten, other critics, and I along with them, would argue that Wroth is working towards early modern society's denial of "the very notion of female subjectivity" (Masten 80). Wroth attempts to do this in several ways, one being through her title character Pamphilia. Nona Fienberg calls *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* "the first sonnet sequence in English written from the point of view of a woman" (Fienberg 175).¹³ Notice, she does not say that it is the first sequence written by a woman,¹⁴ but that it is the first written *from the point of view* of a woman. As we can infer from the title, this sequence is written *by* Pamphilia to Amphilanthus. Now then, who is this Pamphilia? Roberts says, "Pamphilia is described as an unusually learned woman, 'being excellent in writing' (l.i.51)" (Roberts, *Poems*, 42). She further says that "Pamphilia is portrayed as a dedicated and prolific writer, and for obvious reasons Lady Mary Wroth's contemporaries regarded the fictional character as autobiographical" (43). This of course is a reflection on the doubling nature of the sonnet genre; however, as Luckyj reminds us, "Pamphilia and Mary Wroth are not one and the same" (Luckyj 146).

¹³ Natasha Distiller says, "Mary Wroth was the first Englishwoman to publish a Petrarchan sequence" (Distiller 80). The difference here is that she emphasizes the Petrarchan nature of the sequence and therefore its focus on unrequited love.

¹⁴ Once again, Anne Locke is widely considered to be the first female to write a sonnet sequence in English. Hers was a religious meditation on Psalm 51.

After all, at the end of the *Urania*, Pamphilia is made a queen; Mary Wroth's situation does not improve nearly as dramatically.

Naomi J. Miller compares Wroth's work to Shakespeare's plays, a comparison that is useful because it can help to show Wroth as being the next step forward in terms of the introduction of the female voice into the male dominated Petrarchan sonnet sequence. Miller claims that her comparison "illumines not only Wroth's subversion of generic boundaries but also the restrictions on feminine speech which mark even the most vocal of Shakespeare's heroines" (Miller 154). Unfortunately Miller does not discuss *Alls Well, that Ends Well* within her comparison, a shortcoming in her argument, that perhaps exists, once again, because of the play's lack of popularity. While we determined that the strongest relationship in *Alls Well* exists between Helena and the Countess, two female figures, it is true that "Shakespeare's plays often address conflict with fathers in the absence of mothers which affects bonds of friendship...as well as love" (157). It is important, then, that "Wroth rewrites the familial dynamic in her own work to emphasize connections both with and of mothers" (157).

Despite the strength of the relationship between Helena and the Countess, and the connections between Helena and Diana, the females in the play can all be seen to belong to a "subculture", as Miller observes: "In *Urania*, however, Wroth explores the nature not of a female 'subculture' but a female culture, to create the sound not simply of women's voices in a man's world, but of a world of women's voices" (158). This "world of women's voices" is emphasized even more in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, which places us in an almost entirely female world, one

where every thought, feeling, desire, and plea come from a female mind. We get no description of Amphilanthus— besides descriptions of character, like his lack of constancy— in the sequence itself. While Helena uses female stereotypes to her advantage, in order to trick the King into giving her her desires, “Wroth uses the very language of patriarchy to undermine male assumptions of dominance” (159). There are countless examples of this throughout the sequence, including in Sonnet 14 {P16}, in which she says “farewell [to] liberty” (line 13). This entire sonnet is filled with language of conquest, opening with the question “Am I thus conquer’d?” and referring to a loss of power (line 1), which in many ways acknowledges the woman’s position in society. Women were not free in the sense that men were, they were a type of “captive...prisoner, bound, and unfree” (line 4). In the third quatrain she asks, “Why should wee nott loves purblind charmes resist?/Must wee bee servile, doing what hee list?” (lines 9-10). It nearly seems as though she will resist this “hee” who is oppressing her, but instead, as the last line reveals, she willingly gives up her liberty. It is almost as if, with this sonnet, she is acknowledging the reality of patriarchy but is still accepting it because of the power of love. Yet the language she uses still leaves us a little uncomfortable when considering her position. Even if she wanted to resist this control, could she? Did she have that choice as a female? As Distiller says, “the sequence is [not] evidence of the female lover’s simple silencing, but...in the emphasis it inevitably places on her poetic voice, it reveals her poetic distance from and difficulty with the position of the lover in Petrarchism” (Distiller 81). Shakespeare’s Helena is able to work within her

patriarchal culture; Wroth's Pamphilia shows female readers more clearly the shortcomings of Petrarchan patriarchy.

Miller notes that "Wroth disrupts male Renaissance conventions associating women with inconstancy and pretense" (161-2), and, unlike most of Shakespeare's heroines, so does Helena. The constancy of both Helena and Pamphilia is emphasized over and over in their respective works. Wroth takes what Shakespeare did in *Alls Well* and cracks the notion of female subjectivity wide open. Helena gets her man; Pamphilia gets the ability to be her own subject. "Thus," Luckyj points out in her discussion of *Lear*, although it is equally applicable to a discussion of *Alls Well* and Helena,

Shakespeare's Cordelia and Wroth's Pamphilia emerged from the same set of complex cultural contradictions which simultaneously privileged and destabilized feminine silence, despite differences between Shakespeare as an 'upstart' man of the theatre at the height of his career and Wroth as heir to literary and cultural privilege writing from a position of virtual exile. (Luckyj 165)

Both authors, writing from their different positions in society and their different backgrounds, both find the sonnet to be a useful form for addressing the idea of female silencing and subjectivity.

We discussed in chapter one how Helena's soliloquies contain sonnet conventions like dying for love, love as a trial, the lover as an unattainable figure, and the blazon— a catalogue of features and body part descriptions. In writing a Petrarchan sonnet sequence, Wroth deals with these same conventions. Her sonnet

sequence opens with the description of a dream she had of “Venus Queene of love” putting “one hart flaming more then all the rest” within Pamphilia’s breast, and then, being shot by Cupid’s arrow, her heart is “martir’d”, and since that moment, she sighs, “O mee: a lover I have been” (Sonnet 1{P1}). Unlike Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil*, who finds himself in love but incapable of expressing it until his muse tells him to “look in thy heart and write” (*AS* 1), Pamphilia appears to have no choice; her love is thrust upon her by forces beyond her control.

From the outset of the sequence, themes of nighttime, dreams, and darkness are presented, setting the scene of the sequence. Sonnet 1 {P1} begins “When nights black mantle could most darkness prove,” and, soon after, Sonnet 4 {P4} opens with the statement “Forebeare darke night, my joyes now budd again.” Throughout the sequence there is a constant battle between the different advantages offered by day and night. Sonnet 12 {P13}, for instance, provides the following struggle:

Cloy’d with the torments of a tedious night
I wished for day; which come, I hope for joy:
When cross I find new tortures to destroy
My woe-kil’d hart, first hurt by mischiefs might,

Then cry for night, and once more day takes flight
And brightnes gon; what rest should heere injoy
Usurped is; hate will her force imploy;
Night can nott grieffe intombe though black as spite.

My thoughts are sad; her face as sad doth seeme:
My paines are long; Her houers taedious are:
My grieffe is great, and endles is my care:
Her face, her force, and all of woes esteeme:

Then welcome Night, and farwell flattring day
Which all hopes breed, and yet our joyes delay.

Pamphilia seems to embrace night and the chance of escape it offers from the pains of daylight. In fact, in the third quatrain she identifies herself with Night. Pamphilia's thoughts are sad, as the first two quatrains describe, due to her unsatisfied desire, and so Night's face reflects this; her pain is as long and tedious as a sleepless, hopeless night. Her alliance with Night not only reveals her sorrow but also gives her the means of expressing it. This comparison is an important part of what generates Pamphilia's voice. Her voice is the voice of Night.

She is even more explicit about the superiority of night over day in Sonnet 18

{P20}:

Which should I better like of, day, or night
Since all the day I live in bitter woe
Injoying light more cleere my wrongs to know,
And yett most sad, feeling in itt all spite;

In night, when darknes doth forbid all light
Yett see I grieffe aparant to the show
Follow'd by jealousie whose fond tricks flow,
And on unconstant waves of doubt alight,

I can beehold rage cowardly to feede
Upon foule error which thes humours breed
Shame, doubt, and feare, yett boldly will think ill.

All those in both I feele, then which is best
Darke to joy by day, light in night oprest
Leave both, and end, thes butt each other spill.

As in Sonnet 12 {P13}, Pamphilia projects her own tensions and feelings onto day and night in Sonnet 18 {P20}. While day brings her sorrow to light, night is unable to hide it, until it seems she is stuck in a sort of twilight, where day and night spill into each other. Putting Sonnet 12 {P13} and Sonnet 18 {P20} side by side also reveals Wroth's skill as a sonneteer, as Sonnet 12 {P13} is written in the

English/Shakespearean style, while Sonnet 18 {P20} is written in the Italian/Petrarchan style. Playing with these two forms reveals her mastery of the form, since she is able to use each style to suit her need. The couplet at the end of Sonnet 12 {P13} becomes an invitation to Night. The rhyme scheme of Sonnet 18 {P20}— wherein the octave has a unique rhyme scheme of ABBA CBBC, which is reflected on a smaller scale in the sestet with the DEF DEF rhyme scheme— reflects the theme of day and night spilling into each other; they are both similar and distinct, like day and night.

While she does not appear to answer her question about which she should like better, day or night, within this sonnet, Sonnet 19 {P22} opens with the invitation “Come darkest night, becoming sorrow best;/ Light; leave thy light’ fitt for a lightsome soule” (1-2). From this point on she seems to have decided that night suits her best; so much so, in fact, that in the next sonnet, Sonnet 20 {P23}, she can no longer see the light of day: “The missing of the sunn awhile makes night/ Butt absence of my joy sees never Light” (13-4). She reiterates this constant-night state of mind in Sonnet 23 {P26}, in which she states, “I sitt, and wunder att this daylike night” (6), at once acknowledging her state of true night while also commenting on the artificial night of others, lit up by candles and the like in order to dispel the darkness she has welcomed.

Sonnet 23 {P26} also offers an interesting illustration of how Wroth combines the public and private spheres:

When every one to pleasing pastime hies
Some hunt, some hauke, some play, while some delight
In sweet discourse, and musique shoves joys might
Yett I my thoughts doe farr above thes prise.

The joy which I take, is that free from eyes
I sitt, and wonder att this daylike night
Soe to dispose them-selves, as voyd of right;
And leave true pleasure for poore vanities;

When others hunt, my thoughts I have in chase;
If hauke, my minde att wished end doth fly,
Discourse, I with my spiritt tauke, and cry
While others, musique choose as greatest grace.

O God, say I, can thes fond pleasures move?
Or musique bee butt in sweet thoughts of love?

This sonnet not only reveals Pamphilia's values— she values her thoughts above all other earthly pleasures— but it also makes the connection between what is going on outside in the social world and what is going on in Pamphilia's private, interior world. The third quatrain relates the two: some people hunt, Pamphilia chases her thoughts; her thoughts soar as the hawk does; she talks and cries to her spirit as others converse or listen to music. This works to make the public private and the private public at the same time, which is similar to what a sonnet sequence itself does.

Why is there such an emphasis on night and darkness in her sequence? As *Astrophil and Stella* displays, and Shakespeare's utterance in Sonnet 130 that "My mistress eyes are nothing like the sun" counters, it was a convention of the love sonnet for the lover's eyes to be compared to the sun. In Sonnet 8 of *Astrophil and Stella* we get the following lines:

At length he [Love] perch'd himself in Stella's joyful face,
Whose fair skin, beamy eyes, like morning sun on snow,
Deceiv'd the quaking boy, who thought from so pure light
Effects of lively heat must needs in nature grow. (8-11)

Sun and light descriptions fill *Astrophil and Stella*. By emphasizing night and darkness imagery in her sequence, Wroth is both working with Petrarchan conventions and writing against them. In Sonnet 89 of *Astrophil and Stella* Sidney gives us his version of the day versus night debate:

Now that of absence the most irksome night,
With darkest shade doth overcome my day;
Since Stella's eyes, wont to give me my day,
Leaving my hemisphere, leave me in night,
Each day seems long, and longs for long-stay'd night;
The night as tedious, woos th'approach of day;
Tir'd with the dusty toils of busy day,
Languish'd with horrors of the silent night;
Suffering the ills of both the day and night,
While no night is more dark than is my day,
Nor no such day hath less quiet than my night:
With such bad mixture of my night and day,
That living thus in blackest winter night,
I feel the flames of hottest summer day.

It is the absence of Stella and her sun-like eyes that plunges Astrophil into "Sorowe's night" (*AS* Sonnet 91, 3). Astrophil's night is more like the "daylike night" Pamphilia wonders at (*PA* Sonnet 23 {P26}, 6), at least as long as Stella's eyes are there to fill the darkness with light. Astrophil despises Night because it means Stella is not there whereas Pamphilia welcomes it. Pamphilia, in Sonnet 18 {P20}, lives all day in "bitter woe" (line 2). Given the tradition of the lover's eyes representing the sun, she is once again turning the convention on its head. Sidney's Astrophil presents extreme feelings, as sonnet lovers are wont to do, in his description of "living...in blackest winter night" yet feeling "the flames of hottest summer day" (lines 13-4). Pamphilia defies these extremes to enter a world of in-between, where day and night converge (Sonnet 18 {P20}, line 14). In stepping back from these extremes Pamphilia becomes a new sort of sonnet lover; she is passionate in a different way

than Astrophil and lovers like him are. Instead of fire and ice, hers is a passion of quite resilience that exists on the whole continuum. It is no surprise that constancy is Pamphilia's strongest attribute, and most valued one. Pamphilia's lack of joy is caused by her lover, as is Astrophil's— although more by his inconstancy than his absence or unattainable status— but we must remember that Sonnet 1 {P1} claims this love was not her choice, it was forced upon her. As well, very unlike *Astrophil and Stella*, in which Stella's name shines throughout, the name of Pamphilia's lover, Amphilanthus, does not appear anywhere within the sequence except for the title, suggesting that the speaker, rather than the object of her love, is the subject of the poem.

Is there something explicitly feminine about the emphasis on night, or the discretion Pamphilia uses when discussing her lover? Greek mythology associates the moon with femininity through the figure of Diana, and the sun with masculinity in the figure of Phoebus. Philip Sidney uses these figures in his sequence, in Sonnets 13 and 97 for example, and if Wroth is writing in response to her uncle's sequence, it makes sense that she would use the same images. Thus night is associated with femininity for her, as well as for her contemporaries, and it makes sense that she would use that association in her poetry¹⁵. Night and darkness are associated with mystery and secrets; while day brings everything to light, night covers things and

¹⁵ While the moon and Night are not one in the same, they are obviously associated with one another. Additionally, their characteristics are not uniform. While the moon is associated with Diana, and therefore chastity, and wisdom, the moon is also associated with lunacy and inconstancy, the latter of which is in direct opposition to Pamphilia's character. Other positive examples of a female figure of Night, on the other hand, include a reference in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet invites Night, a "sober-suited matron, all in black" to help her prepare for her wedding night (3.2.11).

makes what can usually be seen unseen. As a woman, Pamphilia (and Wroth herself) may be fighting against the idea of the danger of women's speech, which, as Luckyj points out, goes all the way back to "Eve, who 'brought sin into the world by unwise speaking' (Spacks 41)" (Luckyj 45). Pamphilia presents us with a woman who is able to "speak" her deepest thoughts through her sonnet sequence, but in such a way that she maintains her honour and the honour of her love interest. Of course, this secrecy is equally part of the female-silencing Wroth is fighting against, since Pamphilia also "cannot openly reveal her love for Amphilanthus, in keeping with 'all the codes for courtly female conduct, especially secrecy, passivity, and self-control' (Ixii)" (Luckyj 135).

The most powerful argument for Pamphilia's discretion and her connection to night is that this sequence is not addressed to her lover, as the title implies, but more to herself. As the last line of Sonnet 1 {P1} states, "O mee: a lover I have been" (14). Gary Waller states, "At times Pamphilia is 'molested' by her role as an object of the desiring gaze, at others she tries to escape the gaze of lover and lovers, in loneliness, isolation, or sleep. Such reactions can be read, perhaps, as struggles to avoid the constructing of sexual relations by patterns of domination and submission" (Waller, "Mary Wroth", 54-5). Night provides a place for Pamphilia to step outside of the gazes that are placed upon her in the daytime, and it provides a place of privacy, a place of poetry: "When she [Pamphilia] is alone (so far as attendants, suitors, and walled gardens will allow) she, like Wroth herself, is able to populate her mind...with thoughts that, while constructed out of the others' world, nonetheless suggests an area of potential agency" (Waller, "Mary Wroth", 59).

Although Waller discusses the Pamphilia presented in the *Urania*, it is those moments alone that readers assume is the time Pamphilia takes to write her sonnet sequence, and in writing, Pamphilia finds more than relief for her passions, she finds a place to “reappropriate herself as a subject” (Waller, “Mary Wroth”, 56). We know, for instance, that she carves a sonnet into a tree at one point as a way to “make others in part taste my paine, and make them dumbe partakers of my grieffe” (*Urania*, 92.30-1). Writing is a way to make her feelings known—*her* pain, *her* grief—and yet, while she has agency in the moment of writing, she seems to lose it at the moment of publication; that is, once it becomes available to others to read and interpret, some of her agency is lost. We see this when Antissia comes upon her moments after she has finished carving the sonnet into the tree—at which point Pamphilia claims, “many Poets write aswell by imitation as by sence of passion; therefore this [the poem on the tree] is no prooffe against me” of passion (*Urania*, 94.40-1)—and we also see it when Pamphilia, “blushing” and “ashamed” allows Amphilanthus to read some of her verses (320.18-29). The issues surrounding publication and the resulting criticism will be discussed further in the next chapter; for now the focus remains on the fact that by writing sonnets, in places of privacy and away from the gaze of others, Pamphilia finds a place of agency can own her own subjectivity.

There are other themes and/or images that arise in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* that mark it as something different, and mark it as a distinctly female sonnet sequence. One such image is that of banishment. As discussed earlier, Wroth and several women close to her, were in one way or another banished to Penshurst

for going against the norm. As well, in *Alls Well* Helena leaves France in a type of self-banishment—though Bertram is arguably equally as responsible for her banishment since he claims he will not return to France as long as she is there. We can see, then, that voicing their love, for women sonneteers, seems to result in banishment, in part because of the patriarchal society they exist in. Sonnet 38 {P44} opens with the line, “What pleasure can a bannish’d creature have” (1). Why is Pamphilia banished? It is not clear, except that it seems to be as a result of her love. This of course points suggestively to Mary Wroth’s own situation, in that she was banished from the court, perhaps for her relationship with William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. Wynne-Davies writes,

More galling surely for Wroth was that when Herbert’s indiscretion led to further illegitimate children [for he had had other affairs], this time her own, the gender balance of the court had swayed even more in his favour, the misogynistic James promoting his noblemen regardless of sexual infidelities, and punishing the women instead. Admittedly, Elizabeth I’s regular use of banishment as a form of controlling her young male courtiers revealed more about her own self-centered system of loyalties than any supposed ‘feminism’, but there can be no question that women’s standing at court diminished rapidly and consistently throughout James’s reign. (174)

Mary’s uncle Philip Sidney had suffered under Elizabeth’s displeasure when he had married Francis Walsingham without her permission, and now Wroth herself felt the monarch’s displeasure when she was sent away to find her “‘feminine’ safe house” (Wynne-Davies 170) at Penshurst. Of course, this banishment gave her the

time to reflect, and conceivably to write and revise, and so Sonnet 38 {P44} ends with the statement, “Noe, I ame bannish’d, and no good shall find/Butt all my fortunes must with mischief bind/Who butt for miserie did gaine a birth” (12-4). Pamphilia’s banishment, like Wroth’s, led to a birth— the birth of her sonnet sequence, the birth of her as an author/sonneteer, the birth of her self-hood.

Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* begins with the image of a writer unable to write until he does what his muse tells him to and “looks in his heart” (AS Sonnet 1, 1), and when doing so, he of course finds Stella. In Sonnet 39 {P45}, Pamphilia laments:

If I were giv’n to mirthe ‘t’would bee more cross
Thus to bee robbed of my chieftest joy;
Butt silently I beare my greatest loss
Who’s us’d to sorrow, grieffe will nott destroy;

Nor can I as those pleasant witts injoy
My own fram’d words, which I account the dross
Of purer thoughts, or reckon them as moss
While they (witt sick) them selves to breath imploy,

Alas, think I, your plenty shewes your want,
For wher most feeling is, words are more scant,
Yet pardon mee, Live, and your pleasures take,

Grudg nott if I neglected, envy show
‘T’is nott to you that I dislike doe owe
Butt crost my self, wish some like mee to make.

This sonnet reflects the liminal place writing holds; in writing this sequence Pamphilia is able to “beare [her] greatest loss”, but “silently” (line 3). Like Astrophil, she cannot help but write, but unlike her male predecessor, writing does not offer a relief. Instead, she wishes for relief from having to write— which she must do because of her overwhelming feelings of love— at all. The brevity of the sonnet

form, as opposed to long, flowing epistles, reflects her depth of feeling, since “wher most feeling is, words are more scant” (line 10).

The blazon was a typical convention, used by Sidney and Shakespeare, among others, as a way to describe the beloved— even Helena uses it in her soliloquy, when she catalogues some of Bertram’s features that she loves: “His archèd brows, his hawking eye, his curls” (1.1.96). Interestingly enough— though unsurprisingly, since we have already discussed the lack of description or even appearance of anything about the lover in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*— Wroth chooses not to use a blazon to describe her lover. Nona Feinberg gives this explanation:

In Petrarch’s love poetry...the male poetic corpus is substantiated at the cost of the dismemberment of Laura, his beloved...To [Thomas] Green’s speculation that the love poetry of a female poet might escape this process, Wroth’s poetry provides one clear answer: no blazons scattering the parts of her beloved, no fetishizing of a veil, a foot, an eyebrow, and thus no self-creation out of the scattered parts of the beloved. (Feinberg 177)

Instead, Wroth presents a type of anti-blazon, or self-blazon, which appears in Sonnet 48 {P55}, the last of the sonnets in the first part of the sequence:

How like a fire doth love increase in mee,
The longer that itt lasts, the stronger still,
The greater, purer, brighter, and doth fill
Noe eye with wunder more, then hopes still bee

Bred in my brest, when fires of love are free
To use that part to theyr best pleasing will,
And now impossible itt is to kill
The heat soe great wher Love his strength doth see.

Mine eyes can scarce sustaine the flames my hart
Doth trust in them my passions to impart,
And languishingly strive to show my love;

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

Pamphilia.

The speaker describes her own eyes, her heart, and her breath, not her lover's. Just as I suggested that her initial statement "O mee: a lover I have been" (Sonnet 1 {P1}, 14) suggests that she is the true subject of this sequence, so her use of the blazon to describe herself seems to suggest this as well. Feinberg says, "Wroth knows...the danger of 'dismemberment,' exclusion from membership in her community, that her writing and publication challenge. She knows the codes of her courtly world. In writing her poetry she negotiates between the violation she risks and the work she values" (Feinberg 177). If "dismemberment" was a way to assert power over another person, Pamphilia's use of the blazon for herself allows her to assert power only over herself, as she is subject only to herself.¹⁶

This closing sonnet is forceful in other ways as well. It ends with Pamphilia's name, her signature, which creates a powerful statement. In case we have forgotten who the "I" of the sonnet sequence is, it is here given. The use of enjambment in this sonnet adds power to each line, building the intensity so that when we get to the final line we can feel the power in her statement that she will love until she dies.

¹⁶ Nancy J. Vickers claim that a blazon can be a shattering experience for both the describer and the described—a type of "double dismemberment" (Vickers 240)—complicates Mary Wroth's use of a self-blazon as a way to gain subjectivity since it would suggest that at the same moment she is asserting control she is also subjecting herself to a type of silencing (240).

This statement echoes Helena's powerful love statement at the end of her sonnet letter. Like Helena, who was willing to die for love, Pamphilia says "Love I will till I but ashes prove" (line 14). While critics¹⁷ get excited over the fact that this seems to be the only place in the sequence where Wroth pulls the sort of doubling that her uncle, and other sonneteers, was famous for, and makes a direct reference to her lover William Herbert ("Love I *will*..." (my emphasis)), it is also a statement of her constancy. If this is indeed a personal statement from Wroth, and not just a poetic convention on the part of Pamphilia, Wroth is defying her court, and her culture, which have banished her for her sexual independence and her defiance in choosing for herself whom she will love. Gary Waller claims, "Wroth's literary voice was silenced by the disapproval of the court just as she was marginalized by her lifestyle and the choices made for her by her status as widow, mistress, and mother" (Waller, "Mary Wroth", 59). Reactions to Wroth's literary voice, however, are more complicated than this, and, as we shall see, reception is mixed in regard to her literary endeavors. Ben Jonson falls on the side of praise; Edward Denny, Baron of Waltham falls on the side of deep disapproval. Both men have reasons for choosing the sides they do, which go beyond simple literary style preferences. However, for Wroth herself it seems to matter much less what others thought of her. Marion Wynne-Davies says, "it is Mary Wroth who was, as the last Sidneian vocalizer, also the final inheritor of her family's specific culture" (167), and this culture allows her

¹⁷ Roberts notes that May N. Paulissen "first noted the possibility of a pun on the name "will"(Roberts, *Poems*, 115), and Roberts herself makes the claim that if it is indeed an embedded name (as in the style of Philip Sidney or Shakespeare), "it make by alluding to her lover, William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke. If so, here is one of the very few places in which the identification of Amphilanthus is made explicit" (115), although there are other clues left in the *Urania* as well.

the space to find her own voice and place her work beside, not beneath, the work of her famous uncle.

CHAPTER 4: “Heroic but nearly hopeless contradictions”: Edward Denny, Ben Jonson, and the Reception of the Female Voice

“To the Learned Critic”

*May others fear, fly, and traduce thy name,
As guilty men do magistrates: glad I,
That wish my poems a legitimate fame,
Charge them, for crown, to thy sole censure high.
And, but a sprig of bays, given by thee,
Shall outlive garlands, stol'n from the chaste tree.*
(Jonson 40)

We have discussed the difference between private and public writing, and how women— in general and in regard to their writing— fit into the public and private spheres. As noted, Josephine A. Roberts claims that “Lady Mary Wroth composed her prose romance *Urania* [and the accompanying sonnet sequence] at the height of the Jacobean debates concerning the nature and status of women” (Roberts, *Urania*, xv). This debate naturally included discussions concerning women’s writing and publishing. There are hundreds of early modern women writers, and even examples of women who had their writing published, including Amelia Lanyer and Elizabeth Cary, so Mary Wroth was not alone in her endeavors. However, her position in society and her genealogy, as well as her subject matter (a romance and a Petrarchan sonnet sequence among other writing), set her apart. It is still up for discussion whether or not the *Urania* and the accompanying *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* were published at Mary Wroth’s direction, or if that was done without her permission. Naomi J. Miller and Gary Waller note the “controversy” surrounding the publication of the *Urania* and attached sequence (Miller and Waller 5). Jeff Masten chimes in more explicitly on the topic by stating that “We do not know whether Wroth initiated, assisted, or otherwise participated in the volume’s

printing” (Masten 83). Rosalind Smith proposes that “Wroth’s rhetorical disassociation from the text [evidenced through her letters to Buckingham] allows her to position herself officially as innocent of both offence and a desire for publication, while still allowing the text to circulate” (R. Smith 411), implying that Wroth was in some way complicit in the process of publication. Wroth’s uncle, Sir Philip Sidney, would not have considered publishing his work during his lifetime. His works were only published after his death; when he was alive, they circulated among friends and members of the court. The idea of the ‘author’ was arguably only just coming into being. The fact remains that Mary Wroth’s works were published, however, and while it is valid to consider, from our current perspective, the value of her addition of the female voice to the love sonnet sequence, it is also important to consider how this voice was received by readers in her own time.

Why is it valuable to consider how her works were received in her own time? While we can interpret her poetry and the new ground she broke in writing it by reading it now, it is worthwhile to see what her contemporaries thought. Given the debate surrounding the status of women, especially as writers, the responses to her sequence can add important information to the debate. The status of the two critics who weigh in on Wroth’s work considered here also gives us different perspectives to consider. Edward Denny was a nobleman; Ben Jonson was one of the top writers of the period and a burgeoning literary critic. These positions give the two men different points of view and different motives for reacting as they do, something we, as literary critics considering Mary Wroth’s poetry, ourselves must consider.

As with any writer, there are instances of both positive and negative reception; however, it is interesting to consider how some of Mary Wroth's contemporary critics responded to her writing. As a way of clarifying this question we can look to a poem by Denny, entitled "To Pamphilia from the father-in-law of Seralius," or "To the Lady Mary Wroth for Writing the Countess of Montgomery's Urania." The presence of the two titles in itself is intriguing since it makes a direct connection between Pamphilia and Mary Wroth and Denny's son-in-law as Seralius, implying that the two are one and the same. Chapter two contained a discussion on doubling. Like her father's and uncle's writing, Mary Wroth's romance, the *Urania*, contains characters who seem to represent figures of the court. Unfortunately not all of these representations are positive, thus causing dissatisfaction to some readers. Denny's reaction is not in direct response to the sonnet sequence itself, but to the *Urania*, which *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* was published in conjunction with. However, his direct association with Wroth to Pamphilia, the sonnet-writer figure, and his bold statements about Wroth's choice of literary forms, make his response valuable to look at in regard to a response to a female writer.

Roberts explains that "Her [Wroth's] artistic efforts...aroused controversy when shortly after the publication of her prose romance, the *Urania*, several noblemen accused her of portraying their private lives under the guise of fiction" (Roberts, *Poems*, 3). Edward Denny is one such displeased reader. Whether incorrectly or not—and Wroth vehemently counters his claim in her letter to him¹⁸— "Denny claimed he had been slandered in the first part of *Urania*, where the

¹⁸ See Appendix A in Josephine A. Roberts's *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*. Within

episode of Seralius and his father-in-law pointed to his own personal affairs. Lady Mary insisted that she was innocent of this crime, although her story resembled the facts of Denny's life" (B. Smith 64). To show his displeasure, "Lord Denny attacked the work and wrote a bitter poem in revenge":

1 Hermophradite in show, in deed a monster
As by thy words and works all men may conster
Thy wrathfull spite conceived an Idell book
Brought forth a foole which like the damme doth look
5 Wherein thou strikes at some mans noble blood
Of kinne to thine if thine be counted good
Whose vaine comparison for want of witt
Takes up the oystershell to play with it
Yet common oysters such as thine gape wide
10 And take in pearles or worse at every tide
Both frind and foe to thee are even alike
Thy witt runns madd not caring who it strike
These slanderous flying f[l]ames rise from the pott
For potted witts inflamed are raging hott
15 How easy wer't to pay thee with thine owne
Returning that which thou thy self hast throwne
And write a thousand lies of thee at least
And by thy lines describe a drunken beast
This were no more to thee than thou hast donne
20 A Thrid but of thine owne which thou hast spunn
By which thou plainly seest in thine owne glass
How easy tis to bring a ly to pass
Thou hast thou made thy self a lying wonder
Fooles and their Bables seldome part asunder
25 Work o th' Workes leave idle bookes alone
For wise and worthyer women have writte none.
(Roberts, *Poems*, 32-3)

Edward Denny's response to Wroth is astounding for several reasons. He opens by calling her a hermaphrodite and a monster. This initial charge immediately makes his attack not only an attack on her writing, but also an attack on her as a female

her letter Wroth explicitly says "I would have trulie and constantlie sworne, that I no more meant harme to my Lord Denny or his house, then to my selfe. Nor Did I ever intend one world of that book to his Lordships person or disgrace" (237).

writer, with the word “monster” connoting the idea that what she is doing is unnatural. Where Wroth, within her sonnet sequence, claims that writing is a type of giving birth, Denny makes this out to be a monstrous birth, where the child is an idle fool, much like its mother. As well, in response to her writing, which he saw as slanderous and libelous, he offers his own slanderous statements. He refers to her as a common oyster, and one which “gape[s] wide/And take[s] in pearles or worse at every tide” (line 9-10). This appears to be a remark on Wroth’s sexual promiscuity, and while Denny covers his statements with the qualifications that he is also writing ‘ly[s]’, undoubtedly this is a fully intended and well-aimed blow.

The greatest barb in the poem comes in the final couplet, when Denny advises Wroth to “leave idle bookes alone” (line 25), after all, “wise and worthyer women have writte none” (line 26). Denny obviously feels that it is not a woman’s place to be writing romances or sonnet sequences, and perhaps not any type of writing at all— religious or devotional writing excepted, as he reveals in his response to her letter by saying “followe the rare, and pious example of your virtuous and learned Aunt, who translated so many godly books and especially the holly psalms of David” (Roberts, *Poems*, 239). The lines of the poem imply this same sentiment: Wroth should instead take up the work she, as a good Christian woman, should be involved in. Natasha Distiller claims: “Denny is invoking the commonplace stereotype of the pious woman, with its concomitant implication that a woman’s only active duty is to spiritually uplift others with her purity and goodness (the role of the Petrarchan mistress, and, arguably, the role of women within Petrarchism” (Distiller 86). Of course, we have discussed how Wroth is both writing within

Petrarchism and fighting against it, even in the act of writing itself. Evidently Denny is very much a part of the traditional Petrarchan way of viewing women.

Other writers, either responding to Wroth's own writing, or otherwise praising her as a patron of literature, play on the pun her name allows, of Wroth and worth¹⁹. It is hard to know if Denny is playing on this pun as well in the last line of his poem. If he is, he seems to be reminding her that the Wroth women, unlike the Sidney women, do not spend their time on wasted pursuits like writing. Perhaps he is reminding her of her own "noble blood," as well as her husband's, with which she had been "counted good" in the eyes of the court, at least before his death.

Heather Wiedemann claims that "Denny's charge of monstrous self-display captures the essence of a general reaction to Wroth's writing — a reaction which led male readers to view the *Urania's* author as an unnatural sight, or, even more precisely, as a scandal" (Wiedemann 191). It seems that Mary Wroth did not mind being considered scandalous — either in regard to her sexual activities or her writing. Thus Wroth did not cower when faced with Denny's condemnation. Instead, she, as Roberts says, "responded by turning the verses back against him, and her rhymes match his, word for word" (Roberts, *Poems*, 34), in a poem entitled "Railing Rimes Returned upon the Author by Mistress Mary Wrothe":

1 Hirmophradite in sense in Art a monster
 As by your railing rimes the world may conster
 Your spitefull words against a harmless booke
 Shows that an ass much like the sire doth looke
5 Men truly noble fear no touch of blood

¹⁹ Josephine A. Roberts presents other examples of this use of the pun, including George Wither, in his *Abuses Stript and Whipt*, and Joshua Sylvester's anagram "AL-WORTH" in his funeral elegy *Lachrimea Lachrimarum*, to Sir William Sidney (Roberts, *Poems*, 18).

Nor question make of others much more good
 Can such comparisons seme the want of witt
 When oysters have enflamed your blood with it
 But it appears your guiltiness gapt wide
 10 And filld with Dirty doubt your brains swolne tide
 Both frind and foe in deed you use alike
 And your mad witt in sherry aequell strike
 These slanderous flying flames raisd from the pott
 You know are false and raging makes you hott
 15 How easily now you do receave your owne
 Turnd on your self from whence the squibb was throwne
 When these few lines not thousands writt at least
 Mainly thus prove your self a drunken beast
 This is far less to you than you have donne
 20 A T[h]rid byt of your owne all wordes worse spunn
 By which you lively see in your owne glasse
 How hard it is for you to ly and pass
 Thus you have made your self a lying wonder
 Fooles and their pastimes should not part asunder
 25 Take this then now lett railing rimes alone
 For wise and worthier men have written none
 (Roberts, *Poems*, 34-5).

Of Wroth's response, especially lines 9 and 10, Barbara Smith notes, "Wroth reflexively places the blame on the accuser, asserting that it is his own guilt that causes him to see himself in her work" (B. Smith 66). Despite her brave and witty, albeit just as insulting, response, Wroth "wrote to the Duke of Buckingham, the powerful friend of James I, to assure him that she never meant her book to offend and that she had already stopped the sale of it" (Roberts, *Poems*, 35). Whether this occurred before (as R. Smith argues) or after receiving Denny's poem does not matter much, since she still responded to Denny's outrageous attack, especially since "no evidence exists to suggest that Wroth's letter to Buckingham seeking the text's withdrawal from sale resulted in the text's suppression" (R. Smith 411). As Michael G. Brennan acknowledges, "it is at least clear, despite the scandalous outcry which greeted the publication of *Urania* and her offer to the Duke of Buckingham to

have the entire edition withdrawn that Lady Mary continued after 1621 meticulously to work over and improve the printed texts of her published works” (Brennan 86).

Wiedemann claims that Denny’s response “captures the essence of a general reaction to Wroth’s writing” (191). This may be so, but we are also provided with examples of figures who did not consider Wroth’s work to be something monstrous and unnatural, but viewed it as excellent poetry, and viewed her as an excellent poet. The best example of a figure with this way of thinking is Ben Jonson. According to Ian Donaldson, Ben Jonson “— as many good judges believed throughout his lifetime and the century following his death— was the greatest literary figure that England had ever seen” (Donaldson 21). If this is so, his opinion of Mary Wroth is invaluable in revealing what other writers of her time thought of her. Beyond being a prolific writer, Jonson, Richard Dutton claims, “was the first Englishman to practice literary criticism with any system and consistency, laying the groundwork which made the idea of criticism as ‘a major literary genre’ in our culture possible” (Dutton 2). This doubles the value of his opinion, for he is no longer just a casual reader, but someone who engages with texts both as a writer and as a critical reader.

Dutton explains how Jonson was able to become this “first” English literary critic:

Jonson’s career...coincided with a key turning point in early modern culture, one that set the course for the profession of letters essentially as it has unfolded over the last four centuries. It is the moment to which Michel

Foucault refers when he writes that the 'coming into being of the notion of the 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences'. (Dutton 3)

The dawn of the seventeenth century was a grand time of change for the English literary world. While cultural changes and forces were at work to allow Mary Wroth to publish the first female-voiced sonnet sequence, other forces were at work changing the way writing was made public:

The 'older system of polite or courtly letters' (to which, for example, Philip Sidney unequivocally belonged...) was *not* 'swept away' during Jonson's lifetime; his practice as an author was very largely shaped by the dominance of the court, as the principal source of both patronage and authority. But it was paralleled, and to a degree challenged, 'by a new print-based, market-centered...literary system'. (Dutton 2)

As a type of 'proto-author,' Jonson built his literary career, "by not siding with either the old or the new literary systems, but by exploiting the potential of both, as they existed (not always harmoniously) side by side" (Dutton 2). This made him a very busy man:

He was involved, often simultaneously, in the old system of courtly, aristocratic and civil patronage (to that extent remaining locked into the expectations and practices of earlier ages), in the commercial world of the playhouses, and in the print culture where the future was to lie (in those

spheres anticipating many of the changes that were to overtake authorship in succeeding generations).” (Dutton 2-3).

The growing “print culture” Dutton describes may also point to why Wroth’s literary works were published during her lifetime, unlike her uncle’s. She, like Jonson, was a participant in this changing literary system. Dutton claims that Jonson “may lay reasonable claim to have been the first Englishman to build a sustained career solely on his skill with a pen” (Dutton 2). And, what is more, “Jonson wrote so much of his criticism in open defence of his own practices as a writer” (Dutton 4). This seems to be a natural place for literary criticism to start; as well, it sets Jonson up as a defender of literature, so it is perhaps unsurprising that he came out in support of Wroth.

Jonson certainly was a great literary figure, but there is another who looms large in the early modern period. A comparison between Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare— one that does not aim to pit the two against each other— can add valuable insight into the different roles playwrights and poets could play within a society. Mary Wroth is contemporary with both writers, and while she can be associated more closely with Jonson personally, as a writer her work seems to fall in a space between the two. Shakespeare was, and is today, a popular playwright. Edmondson and Wells argue that “Shakespeare’s sonnets are as close as we can get to being the private poems of an otherwise public author” (82).²⁰ Jonson, on the

²⁰ Just as we attempt to learn biographical information about Wroth from her sonnets, so we have done, if not more so, with Shakespeare. Of course we must remember that “Any attempt to relate a work of art directly to the intimate, personal life of the artist needs to be treated with caution, even suspicion” (Edmondson and Wells 22).

other hand, tried to disassociate himself with the theatre, and seems to have only written plays when it was necessary: Jonson was “at pains to establish for himself the role of the free-spirited author, rather than of anyone formally attached to the socially dubious institution which is the professional theatre” (Dutton 145). Jonson is often accused of being overly critical of Shakespeare, even to the point of envy (Dutton 144); however, it seems to be that they were two very different writers with two different goals in mind. As well, despite the fact that they were born only eight years apart, they died twenty-one years apart, and the amount of cultural change that took place between 1616 and 1637 is vast.

Shakespeare was a playwright first and a poet second; he wrote his narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, during the period when the theatres were closed. Jonson was a poet first and a playwright second; according to Donaldson, “Even at the height of his dramatic career, the theatre remained for Jonson...a place he continued to regard with a certain wariness and distrust” (Donaldson 236). As well, Shakespeare’s plays seem to focus more on entertainment than on the Horatian duality of teaching *and* delighting, to Jonson’s annoyance. In *The Winter’s Tale*, for example, Jonson complains to William Drummond, “Shakespeare...brought in a number of men saying they had suffered shipwreck in Bohemia, where there is no sea near by some 100 miles’ (168-70)” (Dutton 152). While such issues do not alter the value of the play from an entertainment standpoint, they do from a standpoint that values accuracy as part of the entertainment. Between the times of Shakespeare and Jonson a change takes place. As Dutton notes,

The distinctions we are here observing are paralleled in the transition from a culture dominated by the spoken word to one dominated by the written. The spoken word has a specific, local force which is eventually lost; the written word can at least masquerade as permanent, immutable. The spoken word can be publically shared by a community; the written word is essentially for the private reading of an individual. In all of Jonson's plays (or, more precisely, all of those he preserved), and despite their effectiveness on the stage, their status as *written* word is unmistakable. (Dutton 51)

This distinction, to me, seems to be the difference between Jonson and Shakespeare, and it brings in the ongoing discussion about public versus private and the place writing holds between the two, indeed the place that the sonnet sequence holds between the two.

Besides the obvious fact that plays are written to be performed, there is something notably performative about Shakespeare's plays. Although they, like Jonson's, were published, there seems to be something lacking from them if they are simply read and not seen. *All's Well* once again provides a perfect example of the performative element of Shakespeare's work. E.M.W. Tillyard claims, "on the only available criterion [due to its lack of "regular presentation" on the stage], that of reading, it remains true that in its total effect *All's Well* fails and that the failure is caused most obviously by the comparative feebleness of execution" (Tillyard 90). Tillyard's answer to the question of whether or not *All's Well* is a failure is that it is a failure when read. Its performance is its saving grace. This claim is made more

visible in the way that criticism of the play has changed over the last century. As Gary Waller discusses,

recent work on such matters as theatrical fashion (and the very nature of what constitutes theatrical experience), historical context, genre, sexual and gender politics, and almost a century's investigations of the origins or stories behind the play have all made *All's Well* not so much—in words used to describe its first production in 1741—an “unfortunate” comedy, but what a 2004 reviewer termed “this infinitely fascinating” play” (“the Unfortunate Comedy” 2).

Of course, we have been able to read the play since its publication in 1603, but “*All's Well* has, in fact, been and continues to be one of Shakespeare's least praised plays—and also, until the late twentieth century, one of the least performed” (Waller, “the Unfortunate Comedy”, 1-2). The fact that opinions have changed since the increase in performance adds strength to the argument that the dramatic performance is equally as important for the play's enjoyment as the script is.

We have discussed how Helena's sonnet and soliloquies within *Alls Well, that Ends Well* provide a publication of private thoughts, and how a sonnet sequence essentially does this same thing. Mary Wroth's sonnet sequence, though very private in language and tone, nonetheless publicizes Pamphilia's interior thoughts. While *Alls Well* is literally a staged performance, Wroth's sonnet sequence is a staged performance in that it is a portrayal of a fictional private world of a female's interior self. Unlike Helena's sonnet, which, though written in a letter, is spoken aloud—it is not allowed to remain in the realm of the written word, but it becomes part of the

performance—, Wroth’s sonnets stay on the page, remaining as the written word, a place that Jonson’s sonnet stays as well.

Unlike Jonson, “There is no evidence that Shakespeare had any hand in the publication” of his plays, “or indeed that he had any ambition to see such works preserved in posterity” (Dutton 43). We do not know if Wroth had a hand in publishing her works or not, and she did attempt, if only slightly, to have them withdrawn from publication. Jonson, on the other hand, put an extensive amount of work into both the writing and publication of his plays: “In the books, all of Jonson’s historical sources are carefully cited in the margins” and “The Texts of *Cynthia’s Revels* and *Poetaster* were revised for the 1616 folio in ways that make them less satisfactory for performance, but fuller and more engaging for the private reader” (Dutton 51). The poems he writes to Mary Wroth, although published and available to the public, themselves maintain a certain private and personal air, and stay on the page. They are only performative in the sense that he writes them with specific intentions in mind and they may not be depictions of his true feelings; he has an agenda. Shakespeare and Jonson were clearly engaged in two different styles of writing for two different purposes. Wroth, falling in the middle, is able to engage and exploit both of these purposes when needed.

This change is valuable to look at because it helps us to see how concerned Jonson was with so many different parts of the writing process in the early modern period. He was concerned with pleasing the right members of the court in order to gain patronage and thus avoid writing for the public theatre; he was concerned with accuracy and truth telling; and he was concerned with making a name for himself as

a writer. All three of these aspects play into our understanding of Ben Jonson's critical review of Mary Wroth as a poet.

Roberts claims that "It is possible that [Mary Wroth] had read Shakespeare's sonnets, but the evidence is not conclusive" (Roberts, *Poems*, 48). Given his own challenges and changes to other sonnet conventions, Shakespeare certainly provides an example of spaces where modification is possible, whether or not Wroth needed such an example. Regardless, together Shakespeare and Wroth's endeavors show that rejuvenating the renaissance love sonnet was the order of the day, and could happen in many ways. However, while explicit links between the Shakespeare and Wroth are difficult to find, the evidence of an association between Mary Wroth and Ben Jonson is quite conclusive. Roberts writes that "[Robert] Sidney was in frequent communication with Ben Jonson" (Roberts, *Poems*, 14), and, "Through her involvement in the court activities, especially the performance of *The Masque of Blackness*, Lady Mary Wroth became acquainted personally with Ben Jonson" (Roberts, *Poems*, 15). Elaine Beilin notes that "Wroth's relationship with Ben Jonson seems to have been one of mutual admiration" (Beilin 210). Marea Mitchell acknowledges,

Critics have commented on various connections between Ben Jonson and Mary, Lady Wroth. We know, for example, that Wroth performed in Jonson's 'Masque of Blackness', that Jonson wrote commendatory verses to her and dedicated *The Alchemist*, the only one of the first folio of plays to be dedicated to a woman, to her. We know he described her as 'most aequell with virtue and her Blood: The Grace and Glory of Women'. We know, too, that he is

reported to have criticized the behavior of the man to whom she was married. According to Drummond, Jonson felt that ‘my Lady Wroth is unworthily married on a Jealous husband’. (Mitchell 115)

Where Edward Denny seemed to value the type of noble who had no literary interests, like Sir Robert Wroth, Jonson seems to think that Robert Wroth was not Mary Sidney Wroth’s equal.²¹ Barbara Smith backs up this claim by arguing that “Despite Mary’s marriage to Wroth, Jonson makes a point of identifying her as a Sidney” (B. Smith 69).

Jonson was, likely because of his pursuit for patronage, an admirer of the Sidney family. Brennan argues that “his warm dedication to her of *The Alchemist* (1621)— the only one of Jonson’s plays to be addressed to a woman— may be interpreted as a key moment in Lady Mary’s transition from private to public status as a patron and guardian of the literary reputation of her illustrious uncle” (Brennan 73). Jonson himself became a sort of “guardian of the literary reputation” of Sir Philip Sidney, and his connection to the Sidney-Herbert family only grew throughout his career, as we can see in his dedicatory poem “To Penshurst”, which celebrates the Sidney family legacy. Roberts notes that he writes dedicatory pieces to both Mary Wroth and Elizabeth, the daughter of Sir Philip Sidney. She says, “Jonson seems to have taken an interest in extending courtly compliments to both of these women, perhaps in an effort to strengthen his relationship to the Sidney-Herbert family and to his chief patron, William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke” (Roberts,

²¹ Jonson did, it must be acknowledged, write a poem to Sir Robert Wroth, as well as his wife Lady Mary, entitled “To Sir Robert Wroth”, although Gary Waller argues that the poem may be “indulging in sarcasm” and in fact emasculates Wroth (Waller 44).

Poems, 17). Herbert was, of course, that same first cousin who was father to Wroth's two illegitimate children and possibly the "will" of Sonnet 48 {P55}. Gary Waller also acknowledges that, "As part of his idealization of (and integration with) the Sidneys, Jonson dedicated a number of works to Pembroke" (Waller, "Mary Wroth", 85). Jonson, it seems, did his best to strengthen his connections to this powerful literary family, both through dedications of works and through dedicatory poetry.

The pursuit of patronage may cloud our opinion of Jonson's critical response to the Sidney family's literary works in general, and Mary Wroth's specifically. Smith argues, "If we think of Jonson's epideictic verse as portraiture, then we must conclude that Jonson did not paint his subjects 'warts and all'... His reasons for presenting his subjects' best selves are political, personal, didactic, and artistic" (B. Smith 49). Therefore, among other things, "Our task is to decide how much of his praise is based on the character of the person praised, and how much is done 'to urge a course of action' or to set a standard of morality" (B. Smith 51).

In order to determine this, we must turn to the sonnet Jonson wrote in response to Mary Wroth's sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, "A Sonnet, to the Noble Lady, the Lady Mary Wroth":

I that have been a lover, and could show it,
 Though not in these, in rhymes not wholly dumb,
 Since I exscribe your sonnets, am become
A better lover, and a much better poet.
Nor is my muse, or I ashamed to owe it
 To those true numerous graces; whereof some
 But charm the senses, others overcome
Both brain and hearts; and mine now best do know it:
For in your verse all Cupid's armory,
 His flames, his shafts, his quiver, and his bow,
 His very eyes are yours to overthrow.
But then his mother's sweets you so apply,

Her joys, her smiles, her loves, as readers take
For Venus' ceston, every line you make.

To begin with, as Brennan notes, “The fact that Jonson— never a sonneteer by preference— chose to pen a sonnet in praise of England’s first female compiler of a sonnet sequence is certainly intriguing “ (Brennan 87). Jonson also wrote one other sonnet-like poem to Wroth, as well as a longer poem, both entitled “To Mary, Lady Wroth”. His use of the sonnet form— one that he himself disliked— was a form of compliment to her in itself. Katherine Duncan-Jones makes the argument that “Jonson’s sonnet was written to be printed with the 1621 folio of the *Urania* and *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (as opposed to being Jonson’s generous response to reading through the printed text)” (Brennan 87). If this is true, it might change our understanding of how to read the sonnet, but since it cannot be known one way or the other, all we can really do is see what the sonnet itself seems to say.

From the outset Jonson acknowledges that while he is a lover, and a writer of love poetry, he is not a frequenter of the sonnet form. Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, he makes the grand claim that reading Wroth’s sonnets made him “a better lover and a much better poet” (line 4). The fact that neither he nor his muse are “ashamed” to owe their bettering to a female poet’s verses seems to fly in the face of Denny’s statement that her work is a “monster”. Jonson goes as far as to claim that some of her verses “overcome/Both brain and heart” (line 8-9), a bold statement for a man to make of a woman’s writing.

The form he uses for writing the sonnet, a sort of hybrid between the Petrarchan/Italian and the Shakespearean/English — with a rhyme scheme of

ABBA ABBA CDDC EE — itself may be purposeful act. In Chapter 2 we saw how Mary Wroth used both the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean style within her sequence. Jonson’s hybridizing of the two may acknowledge her use of both. Perhaps it shows how Jonson has become “a much better poet,” now able to control a form to such a degree that he can play with it and make it his own.

Where Wroth’s entire sequence contains only a self-blazon, or an anti-blazon, Jonson’s single sonnet contains two blazons— one dissecting Cupid, the other Venus— and both are significant. Brennan notes,

As a woman, Lady Mary also had to address the traditional Petrarchan model of the male lover wooing his lady. It was not feasible simply to reverse the formula with Pamphilia wooing Amphilanthus...and so instead her sonnets tend to address mythological figures such as Cupid, or the abstractions of fortune, grief, and time. (Brennan 81)

In the first sonnet of her sequence, Wroth claims that she is under the control of both Cupid and Venus (Sonnet 1{P1}). Jonson reverses this claim, declaring that in her poems, or because of them, Cupid is hers “to overthrow” (line 11), and Wroth herself becomes the Venus figure (line 12-4). This inversion would set Jonson’s sonnet up as a perfect epigraph to *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, but even if this was not its purpose, it offers beautiful encouragement for Mary Wroth to take pride in her work and assert herself proudly as a true poet.

We can consider “A Sonnet, to the Noble Lady, the Lady Mary Wroth” to be a poem from one poet to another, but as Mitchell discusses,

How and in what ways sex and gender worked as authoring markers in the seventeenth century are important questions. How gender interacts with or offsets relations of class is also a moot point....[I]t is apposite to wonder what kinds of commonality might exist between a woman of Wroth's background and a man of Jonson's, each of whom has literary aspirations. (Mitchell 116)

Mitchell goes on to say, "Wroth and Jonson, for different reasons and with different levels of intensity and directness (related to their own experiences and understanding of gendered behavior), experimented with models of feminine behavior that escape conventional models" (Mitchell 117). Perhaps this is another reason that Jonson wrote so favourably in regard to Wroth's sequence: "Jonson in praising Wroth and other women acknowledges what could be denied: that women were forming an increasingly important part of the literary culture, as readers, patrons, and writers" (Mitchell 128).

Jonson wrote favourably to and of other women of the time, most notably Lucy, Countess of Bedford, but his relationship with Lady Mary Wroth seems to be something more personal: "Both were involved in unfulfilling marriages, both were alienated at some time from the court, both were accused of slander, and both had literary interests to which they turned to in times of stress in order to affirm a sense of self" (B. Smith 71). We noted how important determining a sense of self was to Wroth's sonnet sequence, and it was equally important for Ben Jonson. Although he was male, Jonson faced his own struggles, especially in his attempts to make a living as a writer. While Jonson's sonnet claims that Wroth has influenced him in such a

way that he has become a “much better poet”, the reverse can also be said: that Wroth’s own work was influenced by Jonson.

Michael Brennan, Barbara Smith, and Elaine Beilin, among others, recognize the influence that Jonson had on Wroth’s poetry, in terms of “themes of steadfastness, and the ‘centered self’” (Brennan 85). A direct Jonsonian influence on her poetry appears in Sonnet 22 {P25}, in phrases such as, “Like to the Indians, scorched with the sunne,/The sunn which they doe as theyr God adore” (line 1-2), or,

Better are they who thus to blacknes runn,
And so can only whitenes want deplore
Then I who pale, and white ame with griefs store,
Nor can have hope, butt to see hopes undunn...(line 5-9).

Such images bring to mind Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness*, written by the request of Queen Anne, which Wroth herself participated in.

The *Masque* itself offers an interesting site of intersecting concerns of gender and class. Clare McManus gives this summation of the complexities of the masque:

The masque genre is one in which the concept of performance itself and in particular that of women, so anomalous in its time, is foregrounded. Against the background of Renaissance England’s rejection of the female dramatic performer, noblewomen are permitted performative expression within the masque. The synthesis of apparent oppositions extends beyond the masque’s structure to its participants; members of royalty appear alongside those actors categorized in the statute of 1572 with vagabonds and beggars, and aristocratic women performed alongside male actors playing female roles.

(McManus 96)

Additionally, “Neither noblewomen nor noblemen were permitted to speak in the masque” (McManus 99), a fact that is fascinating, especially given our earlier discussion, which considered the need for the ventriloquization of the female voice on the public stage, given that all actors were male. It seems that acting was an art that silenced both men and women, at least in terms of court masques, but, given their elite status, this silence was associated with their power—aristocrats would never sink so low as to speak on the stage. However, in terms of female silencing, the masques put Jonson in a unique position: “Commissioned by his queen to script a performance expressly avoiding female speech, Jonson is himself both confronted by and strongly implicated in the restrictions surrounding a feminine presence in the masque” (McManus 96). This places Jonson in an interesting position since “Jonson and Wroth agree[d] on the nature of feminine virtue and both have used (with great variance in frequency) a female persona to express feminine points of view “ (B. Smith 68). This means that Jonson, unlike other men of the period, did not think that the female voice was one that ought to be silenced. He ventriloquizes the female voice himself in various plays, including an interesting comment on the silencing of a (false) woman in *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, and in various poems, including “A Nymph’s Passion”. These facts “suggest that the interest, respect, and admiration that Jonson expresses towards Lady Wroth were genuine” (B. Smith 71).²²

²² Granted, the fact that he seems to satirize learned women as monsters in *Epicoene* and *Volpone* complicates this view of Jonson, since critics often see him as a misogynist thanks to these representations. Of course, similar things can be said of Shakespeare in his plays with powerful women, including *Coriolanus*, *MacBeth*, and

Edward Denny and Ben Jonson represent two opposed views in terms of the reception of Mary Wroth's poetry, though they are not the only figures writing to her or about her. Poets other than Jonson wrote dedicatory poems to her: "William Drummond of Hawthornden...dedicated both an ode and a sonnet to Lady Mary, even though he readily confessed that they had never met" (Brennan 80). Because she was a Sidney, she would naturally become a focal figure of the literary scene. Brennan notes that "Abruptly and perhaps partly through default, Lady Mary Wroth...found herself publically cast as a figure of central importance to an intimate group of writers, including Jonson, who regarded the preservation of the memory of Sir Philip Sidney as a means of bolstering their own literary careers" (Brennan 78). Wroth, we have acknowledged, played her own part in preserving her uncle's memory as a way to launch her career as a writer as well. Roberts says,

a statistical study of the role of female patrons in Renaissance England shows that she was honoured in an exceptionally larger number of works. Of the twenty-two women who received dedications in at least six books, all belonged to royalty or to the highest aristocracy, with the two notable exceptions of Ladies Anne Bacon and Mary Wroth. (Roberts, *Poems*, 22)

This cements Mary Wroth's role as a literary figure in early modern England, at least in regards to the Sidney family legacy and patronage, but what about as a writer?

The significance of Edward Denny's poem, "To Pamphilia from the father-in-law of Seralius", and Ben Jonson's sonnet, "A Sonnet, to the Noble Lady, the Lady Mary Wroth", rests specifically on the fact that both of these poems are responding

The Winter's Tale. This seems to point to the fact that the poet/playwrights' were indeed very much involved in the debate on the role of women in the period.

directly to Mary Wroth's writing. These men are not writing to her to get her attention because she is the daughter of Robert Sidney, or niece of Sir Philip Sidney or Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke; no, they are writing to her because she dared to write and publish a romance and a sonnet sequence, both with a female protagonist/speaker. She gave a voice to the female figure on the previously silenced side of the Petrarchan love relationship, and such an act could not go unheeded. For Edward Denny it is a monstrous act, and so he slanders not only the writing, but the author herself, her noble blood, and her chastity (or lack of). Ben Jonson, in effect the first English poet laureate and first English literary critic, takes another approach. Barbara Smith says, "In Jonson's opinion, at least, Mary's exceptional qualities were her neoclassical interests, her physical presence, and her poetic skill, and he preferred to base his praise on her beauty, grace, and poetic talent" (B. Smith 70). Her chastity never comes up in his writing addressed to her—perhaps he chose to ignore it completely in order to avoid the complexities that the topic of sexual promiscuity promised during this period; perhaps other aspects of her character were more important to him than chastity. What he does choose to say about Mary Wroth is much more important and much more relevant, since,

by 1621 Lady Mary had at least fulfilled the claims made in Jonson's two epigrams addressed to her a decade earlier. She had not only lived up to her literary reputation as 'a SIDNEY, though un-nam'd' (epigram 103) but had also established an independent literary reputation of her own as '*Natures Index*,' transcending the traditional boundaries that restricted women to translations and works of religious devotion. (Brennan 88)

Just as Jonson was a central part of changes occurring in the literary system, so was Mary Wroth. Perhaps he realized this— that there was now a place for the female voice in the realm of love poetry— and therefore encouraged her in her efforts.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

*My muse now hapy, lay thy self to rest,
Sleepe in the quiett of a faithfull love,
Write you noe more, butt lett thes phant'sies move
Some other harts, wake nott to new unrest,*

*Butt if you study, bee those thoughts adrest
To truth, which shall eternall goodness prove;
Injoying of true joye, the most, and best,
That endles gaine which never will remove;*

*Leave the discourse of Venus, and her sunn
To young beeginers, and theyr brains inspire
With storys of great love, and from that fire
Gett heat to write the fortunes they have wunn,*

*And thus leave off, what's past showes you can love,
Now lett your constancy your honour prove,*

Pamphilia (Sonnet 9 {P103})

Poetry is an ever-changing, yet always constant river of voices. As Brian Boyd says, “The competition for attention will lead poets both to invention, which can attract by novelty, and to the alternative, less costly in time and effort, the imitation of devices already known to secure attention by concentrating the patterns of the poetic line” (Boyd 22). In addition, “What begins as innovation often turns into convention” (Boyd 22). When Elizabeth died, the sonnet form so suited to praising her could have died, but what opened up instead was a place for women to speak from. Elizabeth was a powerful female figure, fitting to be represented within Petrarchan conventions of the unattainable woman, yet also defying them by writing her own love poetry. Her lingering presence as a figure of the golden age of England, as well as the previously one-sided nature of the sonnet, opened up a

platform for women to begin writing sonnets, and for men to enjoy reading and learning from this new perspective.

The birth of literary forms can be pinpointed, at least to a degree, as can ages where certain forms are in vogue, but the death of a literary form, to me, seems almost impossible to argue for. It is undeniable that cultures change, or live and die, but a literary form is a type of container that different cultural ideas or values can be put into. How they fit each container depends on the culture and on the individual artist, so at some points in history various containers are set aside because they are not as useful in the current cultural climate. However, this does not mean a form is dead. It always exists, waiting to be filled.

During the late sixteenth century, the sonnet was in vogue, especially thanks to figures like Sir Philip Sidney, whose sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, was composed in the 1580s, and published posthumously in 1591. Sidney was a big figure in terms of the English Petrarchan sonnet sequence, and his lingering presence can be felt throughout the discussion here in various ways. Anthony Low says,

I take Sidney to be an important representative of older ways of thinking about love. In particular, he represents the central traditions of courtly and Petrarchan love, which converge and combine in the love poetry of the Elizabethan period. But he is also among the first to discover—much to his discomfort, if not his virtual self-destruction—that the older ways of loving were no longer satisfactory to a man in his historical situation. (Low 2)

Sidney's sequence is one of the most influential in part because it establishes the conventions of the love sonnet form. Part of the argument for the death of the love sonnet sequence is attributed to the fact that by the end of the sixteenth century it had become an over-used and therefore somewhat empty form.

I do not disagree that this was the case; instead, I propose that because of this reality, as well as because of other cultural changes going on at the end of the sixteenth century and beginning of the seventeenth, there was a place in the love sonnet tradition for a new voice—something to bring life back to the form. Marotti claims that Sidney “made sonnet sequences the occasion for socially, economically, and politically importunate Englishmen to express their unhappy condition in the context of a display of literary mastery” (Marotti 408). As Rosalind Smith discusses, Mary Wroth has the same sort of agenda, only hers includes participation in the debate on the status of women. After all, despite my insistence throughout that Pamphilia and Mary Wroth are not one and the same, it is clear that Wroth does share certain traits and opinions with her created poet, and through her sequence she is in part expressing her own unhappy condition in which women writers are marginalized and/or seen as monstrous whores. Shakespeare as well participates in this debate by also presenting a female sonneteer attempting to express her own subjectivity. Edward Denny's and Ben Jonson's poems offer us a fleeting look into the debate facing the early modern female sonneteer, and while in some ways it seems like those who shared Denny's opinion may have had more influence in the short term, in the long term it is clear that those of Jonson's opinion have echoed louder through the subsequent centuries. Shakespeare highlights the constructed

nature of the female voice, Mary Wroth gives it legitimacy, and Ben Jonson praises it, and, since the early modern period, this paved the way for the presence of the female voice in the sonnet, including the future voices of women like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Edna St. Vincent Millay—women who would go on to challenge the idea of the male dominated love sonnet sequences in dramatic ways and further change the tradition of the love sonnet sequence.

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