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LADY MARY WROTH AND THE PETRARCHAN LABYRINTH:  
THE CROWN OF SONNETS IN *PAMPHILIA TO*  
*AMPHILANTHUS*

Lady Mary Wroth (1587?-1561?) is now a far better-known figure in the English Renaissance pantheon than was the case twenty years ago. After the seminal work carried out in the eighties by the late Josephine Roberts, editor of Wroth's sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*,<sup>1</sup> many erudite studies have appeared with her and her work as subject (or object). However the great majority of such essays and volumes have tended to have either a feminist or gender studies bias, or a cultural and sociological cast in the case, for example, of her inclusion in analyses of the Sidney-Herbert family, of the production of literature in Jacobean England, or indeed of comparisons of her work with other great English Petrarchan or anti-Petrarchan poets (the work of her uncle, Sir Philip Sidney, being a case in point).

In this paper I wish to put forward a suggestion of how studies on Wroth, after having usefully and often very skilfully placed her in the socio-cultural context of her age, could continue by examining her poetry more microscopically as it were, seeing it not so much as the production of a woman related to Sidney and prominent in King James's court and more particularly in that "alternative" and parallel

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<sup>1</sup>Roberts, 1983.

court of his wife Queen Anne of Denmark and of England, but as the creation of a poet *tout court* - a poet moreover who was engaged in the formal and thematic anti-idealistic re-use and critique of Petrarchism.<sup>2</sup> Wroth has been criticised for being a very tardy anti-Petrarchan but through a careful study of, for example, her brilliantly executed *corona*, the keystone of her sonnet sequence, we may perceive that her rewriting of the Petrarchan model gives us an aesthetically rewarding and original rereading of this model, as well, naturally, as soliciting our admiration of her achievement as a woman poet. Indeed this “Crowne of Sonnetts dedicated to Love” could be said to constitute another “first” in her list; *The Countess of Montgomerie’s Urania*, which came out in 1621, is the first prose romance published by a woman in England; *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* is the first sonnet sequence ditto, and thus the crown contained within it is also the first of the few of its kind to exist as the production of a woman. As Roberts, with her habitual precision and accuracy notes, the corona was an Italian poetic form in which the last line of either a sonnet or stanza served as the first line of the next. The number of sonnets or stanzas was variable, from seven to as many as fourteen. Roberts cites, as examples, Tasso’s “Corona di Madriali”, of twelve madrigals in praise of Laura written in 1561-62, and also Annibale Caro’s vituperative corona – the form could be used to blame as well as praise – nine sonnets in which he attacked one of his enemies<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Payne, 2004 e 2006

<sup>3</sup> Roberts, *cit.*, 127.

As far as the English tradition went, Sir Philip Sidney included one of the first examples of the corona in English in the *Old Arcadia* in ten dizains, Samuel Daniel, in *Delia*, used the form for a crown of five sonnets, and Chapman and Donne also composed in this form – the first, in 1595, with “A Coronet for his Mistress Philosophy” (ten sonnets) and the second, in 1607, with “La Corona” a series of seven linked sonnets. Sir Robert Sidney, Wroth’s father, was also a poet and he too attempted the difficult form of the crown but only managed to complete four sonnets and the first quatrain of a fifth. In the light of this, Wroth’s perfectly executed corona of fourteen sonnets within a *canzoniere* of eighty-three sonnets and twenty songs displays itself as the great literary achievement it undoubtedly is.

One of the immediately evident stylistic features of Wroth’s corona is that of closure – or perhaps better *enclosure*. The sonnet sequence itself consists of four sections of which the “Crown of Sonnets dedicated to Love” is the third. Each section or subsequence, all of which include both sonnets and songs, represents and develops a distinctive theme. Thus, the first sub-sequence, of forty-seven sonnets and seven songs, treats of the conflict between Pamphilia’s determination to resist love and her desire to abandon herself to it. The second, of eleven sonnets and three songs, has jealousy and suspicion as its main theme with the female poetic voice rebelling against Cupid’s thralls, but, in the last sonnet of this section asking the god’s pardon. Thus, in the third section, Pamphilia literally or literarily crowns the little god of Love with the series of interlinked sonnets which form the corona. After an interlude of a further four

songs, the fourth and last part of the *canzoniere*, consisting of nine sonnets, finds her, by now resigned, reflecting on the pain and grief caused by love. The crown of sonnets is thus doubly framed and enclosed, first by the fact of being an almost central part of an entire *canzoniere* and then by the fact that this *canzoniere* is part of a prose romance. Although the poems making up *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* were circulating in manuscript form eight years before their publication, when they finally appeared in print it was as an appendix to the romance *Urania*. Wroth subsequently went on however to write *The Secound Part of the Countess of Montgomerys Urania*. In this way the two parts of the *Urania* enclose the sonnet sequence in an outer frame.

This double enclosure is significant when we come to the first – and last – lines of Wroth’s beautifully crafted crown of fourteen sonnets of – naturally – fourteen lines each. Although time presses hard upon me I feel I must read this sonnet to you:

Sonnet 1 (Third Series) (P 77)

In this strang labourinth how shall I turne?  
 Wayes are on all sids while the way I miss:  
 If to the right hand, ther, in love I burne;  
 Lett mee goe forward, therein danger is;

If to the left, suspition hinders bliss,  
 Lett mee turne back, shame cries I ought returne  
 Nor fainte though crosses with my fortunes kiss;  
 Stand still is harder, although sure to mourne;

Thus lett mee take the right, or left hand way;  
 Goe forward, or stand still, or back retire;  
 I must thes doubts indure with out allay  
 Or help, but traveile find for my best hire;

Yett that which most my troubled sence doth move  
 Is to leave all and take the thread of love.

In my opinion this poem is one of the most beautiful - and formally and stylistically satisfying - of the whole of Wroth's *canzoniere*. The total panic stasis as the poetic voice, that of Pamphilia, confronts the "strang labourinth" she has reached in this sonnet is a signpost to the reading of the figure of the labyrinth itself as a forerunner of that of those future Gothic heroines who will be created almost 200 years later – those castle dungeons and attic corridors, those unending passages in deserted convents with which Anne Radcliffe and her sister novelists will depict the solitude and fear of the female mindscape. The more the poetic "I" searches for self-knowledge (it is indeed this for which Pamphilia is searching, rather than the ideal love of the convention in which she is trapped), the more we realise that this search will prove painful and bewildering rather than strengthening and clarifying. Indeed the tone of the whole *canzoniere* – but especially that of the first poem of the corona – recalls the poems of Wroth's kinsman George Herbert (he was Philip Sidney's fourth cousin), for their inwardness and the complexity of their linguistic surface. The figure of the labyrinth is often pointed out as

symbolizing, among other things, Protestant inwardness and is often to be come across in contemporary sermons and emblems.

As far as Wroth's literary past is concerned however the labyrinth is a clear manifestation of the thread of (courtly) love poetry leading from Petrarch's Italy right through Europe to England (via the poetry of Wyatt and then Surrey) and Tudor and Jacobean literature. The Classical and Neoclassical image of the labyrinth, whose building by Daedalus, the maker *par excellence*, is recounted by Ovid in Book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*, was, as is well known, adopted by Petrarch to symbolize the ambiguity of the choices apparently offered by love and of the errors generated by self-deception. In Poem 211 of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* the poetic voice complains:

Voglia mi sprona, Amor mi guida et scorge,  
 Piacer mi tira, Usanza mi trasporta;  
 Speranza mi lusinga et riconforta  
 et la man destra al cor già stanco porge [...]

Mille trecento ventisette, a punto su l'ora prima,  
 il di sesto d'aprile, nel laberinto entrai, ne veggio  
 ond'esca. (341)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Petrarca, 314.

In Wroth's sonnet we have a total reversal of Petrarch's imagery, just as we have the overturning of the relationship between poet and muse (in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* of course, we find a female poetic voice and a male muse). Whereas the Petrarchan poetic subject is blandished by a series of positive, albeit deceptive, personifications of emotions and desires Wroth has no illusions about Pamphilia's mental state. There is no doubt that much of the mental anguish that comes through more and more strongly as the crown sub-sequence proceeds is caused not so much by the oft-mentioned jealousy of the "constant" female lover (Pamphilia – *all-loving*) for the unfaithful beloved (Amphilanthus – *lover-of-two*), but rather by the sense that the love Pamphilia offers – by the very fact that she is claiming agency by offering it – is somehow dangerous and shameful. An examination of the poem from a phonological standpoint immediately reveals that the rhyming and even more the internal (enclosed) echoes of assonance, all point to the credibility of a reading of this kind.

"Danger" and "shame" are indeed the principal semantic markers of the poem, echoed by their stressed phoneme [ei]. Echo is of course the mythological figure and the stylistic technique Dubrow cogently mentions as exemplifying the ideology of Petrarchism. Referring to Thomas Watson's 25<sup>th</sup> sonnet in the *Hecatompithia*, a dialogue between a lover and Echo, she goes on to state:

[...] it not only exemplifies but also enacts the repetitiveness that is the fundamental praxis of Petrarchism, typically realized on levels ranging from diction to stanzaic structure to plot: if the speaker named Author is trapped

in repeating sentiments from which he cannot escape, that process is replicated when Echo mimes his words.<sup>5</sup>

That Pamphilia, the chosen mask or *persona* of the anti-Petrarchan Wroth, also feels trapped is manifested in this sonnet. The two terms cited above, “danger” and “shame”, are directly opposed to the neo-platonic ideal she is desperately hoping for while fighting against, and are echoed during the course of the poem by the lexemes “strange”, “wayes”, “the way”, “fainte”, “without allay”, and “traveile”. We are invited, by the inward echoes to contemplate the love that the sonnet sequence is singing as a conjunction of strange, dangerous and shameful ways. The way itself, the high way the conventional way (the canonical way?) is impossible to find. Any movement regarding any way is accompanied by the un-“allay”ed doubts which assail Pamphilia and is the result of “traveile” (at this point it is useful to signal the constant underlining of a female voice, through female imagery, the unusual spelling of “labourinth” echoed by the term “traveile”). “Strange”, moreover, sends us right back to the hyperbolic and *unheimlich* darkness of the first quatrain of the entire *canzoniere*, with its oneiric opening lines in which sleep is a deathlike trance:

When nights black mantle could most darknes prove,

And sleepe deaths Image did my senceses here

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<sup>5</sup> Dubrow, 1995, 11.



From knowledg of my self, then thoughts did move  
 Swifter than those most swiftness need require:

The poetic “I” (whose senses, not her reason, give her self-knowledge) is from the very beginning alienated from herself, and psychic activity is unnaturally speeded up, the conventional vision of Venus and Cupid which follows being furnished with a sort of surreal glare.

Throughout the corona, throughout the “labourinth”, the sense of being pulled between a desire to sing the existence in the real world of ideal or better of “true” love, and the doubts of the existence of this love in the poet’s tormented mind, means that the possibility of certain surcease of anguish by following Ariadne’s “thread of love” is of paramount importance. The second sonnet has recourse to Petrarchan imagery again as love is celebrated as:

[...] the shining starr of blessings light;  
 The fervent fire of zeale, the root of peace,  
 The lasting lampe fed with the oyl of right;  
 Image of faith and, wombe for joyes increase.

Love is true vertu, and his ends delight;  
 His flames ar joyes, his bands true lovers might.

But, as we may note, further conflict is clearly developing here. The Puritan ethic, already at work in the first sonnet

(“labour(inth)” and “traveile”) is evident in the biblical language adopted (“blessings”, “the fervent fire of zeale”, “the lasting lampe fed with the oyle of right” – a reference to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins – “image of faith and wombe for joyes increase” – implicit here the figure of the Madonna, Wroth’s namesake). The daughter of a Protestant house, at the forefront of Reform from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century has ulterior issues to confront besides those of aesthetics and poetics. Is this the Minotaur at the heart of the labyrinth?

This fleeting vision of “true” love (a subject to the forefront of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* to which his niece pays many a literary compliment and acknowledges many a poetic debt during the course of her *canzoniere*) was also placed as the *finale* of the well-known poem attributed to Walter Raleigh, “As you came from the Holy Land”. This poem, though not in sonnet form, is interestingly anti-Petrarchan up to the penultimate verse. But then it concludes:

Love is a durable fire  
 In the mind ever burning,  
 Never sick, never old, never dead,  
 From itself never turning.

Mary Wroth, however, finally crowns her vision of love with a corona whose last sonnet stylistically, conventionally inevitably and

paradoxically anti-canonically ends: “So though in Love I fervently  
doe burne/In this strang labourinth how shall I turne?”.

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