

How do Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Knight's Tale' and Lady Mary Wroth's 'Pamphilia to Amphilanthus' present the experience of romantic love?

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*'Chaste goddess, wel wostow that I
Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf' (Chaucer 2304-2306)*

In both Chaucer's 'The Knight's Tale' and Wroth's 'Pamphilia to Amphilanthus', experiences of romantic love are presented in unconventional ways to critique the conventions of contemporary society. Writing in the Late Medieval period where value was placed on moral and romantic chivalric codes, Chaucer deconstructs gendered experiences of chivalric love via a kaleidoscope of male voyeurism through which the women are mainly silent. Later during the Renaissance, Wroth bursts through the male literary tradition of love sonnets, becoming the first English female writer to publish a sonnet sequence (Bell 231). She infuses literary history with a female experience of love, as seen through Pamphilia's disappointment by her lover's inconstancy, wherein she expresses reproach for constancy being considered 'necessary' for women but 'unnecessary' for men. As Wroth wrote multiple sonnets with the same title, this essay will use Elizabeth Roberts' chronological dual numbering system to reference Wroth's sonnets, which begins with sonnet P1 and ends with sonnet P103. Both texts present the experience of romantic love on a platform which enables conflicting gendered experiences to interact and clash. Both present women's experiences of romantic love as entrapping them within contemporary social conventions, however, Chaucer also traps Arcite and Palamon in their experience of romantic love, presenting a critique of chivalric romance.

Both texts present love as an essential part of life, elevating its importance within each story. The title of Wroth's 'Pamphilia and Amphilanthus' is significant because 'Pamphilia' is derived from Greek, meaning 'all-loving' and 'Amphilanthus' refers to a 'lover of two' (Roberts 44). Through naming, both characters are defined in relation to their experience of love. Sonnet 1 contains juxtaposed extremes; the bleak imagery of 'nights black mantle' cloaks a vulnerable Pamphilia in darkness, wherein she sees 'death's Image' in her 'sleepe' (1, 1-2), an image which is then punctured by her dream's vibrant brightness of 'burning hearts' with 'one hart flaming

more than all the rest' (8-9). This image of a flaming heart is boldly illuminated amidst the shrouding darkness; yet, its constant burning insinuates almost torturous pain culminating in a symbolic death where Cupid 'martir'd [her] poore hart' (12). This suggests that the experience of romantic love has hurt and irreversibly changed Pamphilia's core, encapsulated in the sonnet's concluding statement: 'O mee: a lover I have binn.' (14). The religious implications of martyrdom elevate Pamphilia's pain to divine realms, conveying the immense importance of romantic love to one's life.

Chaucer also explores the importance of romantic love to life, presenting it through the tale's structure and rhyming couplets. 'The Knight's Tale' is written in iambic pentameter which is an elevated style of writing characteristic of the respected knight-narrator. The iambic pentameter, paired with rhyming couplets, creates a memorable musicality which can be seen in three significant direct parallels. Firstly, Palamon proclaims, 'An shortly, other he wolde lese his lif/ Or wynnem Emelye unto his wife' (1485-1486), with the rhyme combining 'lif' and 'wife'. Arcite engages in a parallel claim, exclaiming 'Ye spleen me with youre eyen, Emelye!/ Ye been the cause wherefore that I dye.' (1567-1568), wherein he rhymes 'Emelye' and 'dye'. Emelye confesses her 'Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf/ Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf' (2305-2306), rhyming 'lyf' and 'wyf'. For all the quotations, the rhyme meshes the words' meanings together, as the regularity of the iambic pentameter and the repetition encourage the readers to associate and equate life, death, and marriage together, presenting romantic love as emblematic of life and death. These parallels situate Palamon and Arcite on a similar plain to Emelye, with the conflation of marriage and death further consolidating how romantic love, under the patriarchal structures and duelling traditions contained within chivalric conventions, traps those involved in life and death.

This elevation of romantic love is essential in constructing an emotionally tense meeting ground upon which men and women interact and romantic love can be used as a mode through which gendered power relations clash. Despite Chaucer writing ‘The Knight’s Tale’ approximately 240 years earlier than Wroth’s ‘Pamphilia to Amphilanthus’, both authors similarly explore the tension in historical romance of ‘politically charged issues of coercion and consent, force and desire’ (Kahn 537), showing that it was - and still is - a constant anxiety for women in patriarchal societies throughout time. Both texts present experiences of romantic love that are affected heavily by men in relegating women to secondary roles, resulting in Pamphilia and Emelye’s disappointment after gendered power relations mutate romantic love into a force with the potential for destruction. Their relationships, therefore, act as a microcosm encompassing patriarchal structures, with Pamphilia’s frequently depressive tone and Emelye’s lack of autonomy exhibiting women’s anxieties within love.

In ‘Pamphilia to Amphilanthus’, despite Wroth awarding Pamphilia narratorial authority over the sonnet sequence, the focus is completely on Amphilanthus, making her narration devoid of true authority. Wroth distorts Pamphilia’s voice and evokes imagery of imperialism and colonialism to show how her limited narrative freedom is not able to liberate her from the patriarchal thralls of romantic love. This can be seen in Sonnet 14:

Am I thus conquer’d? have I lost the powers
 That to withstand, which joy’s to ruin mee?
 Must I bee still while itt my strength devowres
 And captive leads mee prisoner, bound, unfree? (1-4)

Embracing tradition, Wroth uses the Petrarchan *topos* of loss of freedom to personify romantic love as a captor. The metaphor of being ‘conquer’d’ and in ‘ruin’ shapes the

imagination of love to be a battlefield through the language of entrapment, which parallels the violent colonial and imperial expansion led by Britain in the 15th and 16th centuries, during which other countries were ruthlessly subjugated by British forces (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica; Webster and Magdoff). Renaissance culture often constrained ‘a woman’s sense of self by defining her as owned by another’ (Moore 122) and this can be seen here: as a woman, Pamphilia’s experience of romantic love manifests as a battle for control embodying animalistic violence, her strength ‘devowre[d]’. The caesuras in ‘prisoner, bound, unfree?’ fragment the sentence reflecting in the pauses her disjointed sense of self as she yearns for her lover’s constancy and power over herself. The rhetorical questions posit Pamphilia as a helpless victim, as confirmed by the stanza’s conclusion, which ends with an unstressed syllable, leaving her question to appear weak.

While Pamphilia tries to assert power through a sexually desirous voice, it is hidden by innuendo, for instance in sonnet 46, when she hopes love will ‘quench part of [her] flame’ (53, 10), which connotes sexual climax. This powerful rebellion against 17th-century ideals requiring women’s chastity is not enough to stop her from losing her metaphorical battle in love; she surrenders her control as she becomes ‘captive’, thus uncontrollable feelings of love and, by extension, Amphilanthus take authority. Whilst Pamphilia experiences romantic love, the experience is constructed by Amphilanthus, and this notion of men constructing romantic love features heavily in ‘The Knight’s Tale’ as will be explored later in the essay. Patriarchal influence transforms love into a destructive force wherein Pamphilia’s lost sense of self is symbolised as a labyrinth as she poses the question, ‘In this strang labyrinth how shall I turne?’ (77, 1). The labyrinth’s ability to ‘disable vision’, according to Moore, ‘evokes the motif of entrapment’ (113) which represents human frailty as demonstrated by Pamphilia; after her

unfulfilling experience with love, Pamphilia's destructed sense of self manifests in an erratic fluctuation between light and dark, with the oxymoronic 'light's shadow' in sonnet 6 (100, 4) perhaps conveying symbolism of depression.

Similarly to Wroth, Chaucer utilises violent imagery of war to convey how the men's domination has constructed women's experiences of romantic love. When describing Theseus' marriage to Ypolita, it explains that 'What with all his wysdom and his chivalrie,/ He conquered al the regne of Femenye... And weddede the queene, Ypolita' (865-868). 'Femenye' refers to the mythological land of Amazon women warriors, who rejected the company of men except for purely reproductive reasons (Kuiper). Having Theseus' wife be the former Queen of the Amazons creates an intense sense of irony as the idea of 'chivalrie' is centred in love, which contrasts the 'Mynotaur'-slaying (980) hero Theseus who valiantly leads an army to victory, after which he enslaves Ypolita by bringing her back as his wife, regardless of her prior rejection of male company. Despite the chivalric foundation of the text, Theseus' actions in removing Ypolita's power and autonomy to become his wife do not convey love at all, instead displaying corruptive male domination. The lexis of war, for example 'asseged' (881) which means to besiege, is combined with the violent and potentially sexual implications of Theseus having 'conquered' (866) Ypolita in forceful domination - these images of war situate Ypolita as Theseus' opponent, therefore non-consenting in this one-sided marriage. Theseus' war on and domination over all of 'Femenye' implies a territorial possession of Ypolita and she is objectified and brought to Athens unwillingly as a spoil of war. Theseus takes over Ypolita's experience of romantic love and this idea that men construct romantic experiences is intensified through the narrative structure, as Emelye is described through a kaleidoscope of male voyeurism.

Emelye is first described through the knight's narrative, who in turn retells Arcite and

Palamon's perspectives who watch Emelye through their room's window as they are prisoners of war. The motif of being trapped features throughout the whole story, beginning with Arcite and Palamon's imprisonment by Theseus, which allows them to see Emelye, followed by Emelye's personal entrapment when Theseus denies her autonomy by making her the reward for Palamon and Arcite's duel. The potential for romantic love to become a destructive force is therefore illustrated by the recurring theme of imprisonment, which is further evidenced when Emelye is contained within Arcite and Palamon's reductive perspectives. Women were often objectified and idealised in medieval courtly romance (Heale 307); objectified by the male narrators, Emelye is likened to 'lylie[s]' and 'rose[s]' (1036, 1038). These lilies and roses symbolise purity and love respectively, transforming her into a symbol of virginal innocence in the men's eyes as they immediately feel unrequited love for her, vowing to 'fichte' (2115) for Emelye, which is ridiculous as they had never spoken to her before. Romantic love exists as a mode through which gendered power relations clash; objectified by the men, the women remain silent subjects, controlled both through patriarchal structures which encompass gendered power clashes, and through the embedding of homosocial clashes in the medieval experience of romantic love. This adds a dimension where Emelye has such little authority that she cannot have a say in which husband will 'win' her, much less choose to have a husband in the first place. Theseus asserts himself as 'even juge' (meaning 'judge', 1864) and constructs the tournament where Arcite and Palamon will fight; the one possessing most 'myght' (1856) will win Emelye's hand in marriage. Romantic love is distorted, therefore, firstly by male dominion restricting women's choices, and secondly by the contamination of homosocial relationships whereby chivalric romance becomes less about genuine love and more about a competition between men about who possesses most 'honour' (3047).

Amidst the kaleidoscope of male voices in ‘The Knight’s Tale’, Emelye’s desires are only made explicit once, wherein she confesses to the Goddess of Chastity, Diana, that she would like to remain a maiden all her life:

‘Chaste goddess, wel wostow that I
 Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,
 Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf’ (2304-2306)

This explicit wish to not become a wife, and remain a ‘mayden’ forever creates a sad realisation by the end of the text that her autonomy has no part in Theseus’ plans to award her as a wife. As former Femenye royalty, she rejects the ‘compaignye of man’ (2311) and is forced into a marriage where her future husband, Palamon, does not care that she would rather remain a maiden, putting his preferences above hers. Through this, Chaucer critiques chivalric romance by contrasting the explicit wishes for maidenhood by Emelye with the patriarchal declarations of Theseus.

In ‘The Knight’s Tale’, the patriarchal underpinnings of the tale transform love into a destructive force, as evidenced by the perversion of romantic love: the pure beauty of Emelye’s alignment with ‘floures’ (1037) is distorted to the pure violence depicted in the grotesque image of Palamon and Arcite ‘Up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood’ (1660). While the text follows epic events with stories of imperialism and a fight to the death between two warriors, Hulbert (Muscatine 912) argues that the characters ‘lack characterisation’, being the story’s ‘greatest weakness’. However, Paull Baum argues that this lack of characterisation makes the ‘plot more important’ (302), which is a compelling point; the shallow characterisations of Palamon and Arcite make their motives towards Emelye hollow and one-dimensional, based purely on physical attraction. Perhaps Chaucer makes ‘The Knight’s Tale’ purposefully ‘empty’ in a self-aware manner, ridiculing Palamon and Arcite by using the immense violence

of their duel to convey the irony of chivalric medieval romances; such romances glorify duelling traditions in which men would rather obtain a wife by fighting to the death than allow a woman enough autonomy to choose her suitor.

In conclusion, both texts present experiences of romantic love in ways that critique beliefs about romance. While Hanson (Bassnett 112) argues that Wroth's sequence lacks 'tension that might bring [it] to life for... 21st-century readers', this is incorrect: both texts poignantly present anxieties towards love which exist in the present-day - anxieties which concern forces of patriarchal powers used to limit women's autonomy, coercing them to abide by men's desires. By positing Emelye's desire to be a maiden against Theseus' decision for Emelye to be the reward of Palamon and Arcite's fatal battle, Chaucer ridicules traditional chivalric romances, underlining female powerlessness in contemporary society. Meanwhile, Wroth critiques the emotional damage of double standards wherein women's value under the patriarchy relies upon chastity, which does not apply for men. To do this, both texts present love through a microcosm where patriarchal structures are condensed into unequal relationships, where women are subjugated under men's power, therefore critiquing the ability of male domination to transform love into a destructive force.

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