



**Unconventional Love and its Counterparts: Desire, Pain, and Betrayal in Early
Modern Love Lyrics**

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'Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be'

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 138, lines 13-14)

William Shakespeare's sonnets and Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* are testament to the sonnet form's dominance as a poetic vehicle facilitating the boundless literary explorations of love, desire and heartache during the English Renaissance. Shakespeare's collection of 154 sonnets, first published in 1609, addresses a variety of themes dealing primarily with love, the passage of time, and homoerotic desire as both a spiritual and a carnal force. Wroth's sequence of 105 sonnets chronicles the two eponymous characters' turbulent romantic relationship and the betrayal that Pamphilia suffers at the hands of her unfaithful beloved, Amphilanthus. Both sonneteers were extremely significant in shaping the developing literary conceptualisations of love and romance during this period, managing to simultaneously uphold as well as defy canonical conventions associated with the genre. Both writers seem to mediate a delicate and almost precarious balance between the traditional sonnet form and their own more novel, unconventional approaches to it. Using a comparative lens of analysis, this essay focuses on Wroth and Shakespeare's nuanced mediations with desire and identity as their sonnets grapple with poetic convention; whilst simultaneously redefining what it means to love and be loved in verse.

In terms of structural organisation, neither Shakespeare nor Wroth tended to stray very far from the conventions established by the Italian Petrarchan sonnet, which were later altered and adapted into what became known as the English sonnet (or the Shakespearean sonnet). As the name suggests, Shakespeare adhered more strictly to the latter. This formal mode typically consisted of three quatrains characterised by alternate rhymes and followed by a rhyming couplet—all typically composed in iambic pentameter. This is evident, for instance, in 'Sonnet 12', 'Sonnet 23', 'Sonnet 129', and 'Sonnet 138'; all of which follow the ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme that eventually became synonymous with the term 'Shakespearean sonnet'.

Wroth, on the other hand, follows a less uniform structure in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* even whilst making use of established conventions. She does so by incorporating the Shakespearean sonnet's structure and rhyme scheme in certain places, whilst also simultaneously making use of the Petrarchan sonnet's in others (May and Bell 11). This can be seen in how 'Sonnet 24', 'Sonnet 32', and 'Sonnet 34' adhere to the aforementioned arrangement of the Shakespearean sonnet, whereas 'Sonnet 1', 'Sonnet 5', and 'Sonnet 38' align with the Petrarchan convention of an octave succeeded by a sestet. What is especially striking to note is how Wroth still continues to maintain a degree of irregularity even while she seemingly follows these established conventions of structure and form. This is evident in how the opening octaves of 'Sonnet 1' and 'Sonnet 5' adopt a different rhyme scheme for each quatrain—ABAB BABA in this case—rather than abiding by a set rhyme scheme as the Petrarchan sonnets' octaves traditionally would have done. A similar phenomenon can also be observed in how 'Sonnet 24', 'Sonnet 32', and 'Sonnet 34' all deviate from the standard rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet despite following its typical arrangement of three quatrains succeeded by a couplet.

Wroth's tendency to modify and experiment with already established poetic forms indicates a desire to disrupt the patriarchal status quo and assert her own poetic voice within the historically male-dominated literary canon. There is also an element of self-preservation in how she chooses to subtly customise, rather than entirely oppose, these traditional sonnet structures—most probably so that she could avoid being censored altogether. As Bernadette Diane Andrea claims, women writers during this period were already 'bound by the triple injunction to chastity, silence, and obedience' in a society that 'equate[d] female virtue with silence' (335). Hence, for Wroth to even write and publish her own sonnet sequence at this point in time was a radical act in and of itself; and attempting to do so by antagonising existing canonical conventions would have proved to be a near Herculean task.

However, I argue that Wroth's decision to diverge—but not entirely remove herself—from the constraints imposed by traditional forms and structures was not purely motivated by a fear of censorship. Rather, that it was a conscious choice made to legitimise the ways in which she reshaped poetic convention and created room for women's voices to claim agency within them. By deliberately situating herself within the framework of traditional sonnet structures, yet still going on to subtly modify their inner workings, Wroth carves out a liminal space for her poetry (and by extension, for her own identity as a poet) to occupy. This liminal space—located between the established conventions of the sonnet form and the novelty of a female-oriented narrative structure—thus provided her with the means to alter its praxis from the inside. It can be said, then, that Wroth *repurposes* convention more than she seems to explicitly defy it. The radical act of inserting her voice within the very structures designed to silence her as both a woman and as a poet—and as a woman poet in particular— highlights her overarching concern with the modes through which romantic love could be articulated, understood, and engaged within verse.

Moreover, these ideas are echoed further throughout the sonnet sequence through Wroth's preoccupation with the skewed presentation of romantic love and the shifts required to decentralise the masculine perspective from its narrative. In fact, the prevalence of these thematic concerns can be inferred from the title of the sequence itself—'*Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*', with special emphasis to be placed on Wroth's powerful choice of diction here. Her usage of the word 'to' in the title makes it abundantly clear from the beginning that the sonnets are to function as direct addresses dedicated by Pamphilia to Amphilanthus. This is significant because it highlights how Wroth immediately delineates the perspective from which this love story is about to be told; a perspective made distinctive by how it places a woman's voice at its centre rather than a man's.

Furthermore, it also acts in stark contrast to the title of her uncle, Sir Robert Sydney's, own influential sonnet sequence—'*Astrophil and Stella*'— which played a key role in popularising the sonnet form during the early English Renaissance. Sydney's use of the word 'and' when establishing the titular planes of the lovers' relationship suggests a binary equalising of sorts, whereby the portrayal of love is depicted as a two-sided story that seems to balance the considerations of both the lover and his beloved as stakeholders in equal measure. What makes this significant, then, is that Sydney's sonnet sequence goes on to orchestrate their romance through the lens of Astrophil's emotions and experiences as he pursues his beloved; despite the title's implications regarding the dual nature of romantic love. This falls into line with earlier Petrarchan tropes that presented romantic love as a process initiated by and experienced primarily through the male lover's eyes, whilst his female beloved remained a mere object of desire resigned to the peripheries of the narrative. Wroth's more singular approach seems to abandon these pretences of a binary narrative, instead choosing to explicitly declare Pamphilia's voice as the dominant one through which their relationship is explored. In doing so, she also subverts the established Petrarchan conventions of how the roles of Lover and Beloved are typically configured; choosing to make Amphilanthus the male object of Pamphilia's affections, rather than the other way around. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski even goes so far as to say that Wroth's decentring of the masculine voice from the romantic narrative of her sonnet sequence 'displaces and silences the male beloved even more completely than is usually the case with the Petrarchan lady' (253). It can therefore be said that, within the world of the sonnets, Wroth allows women the agency to claim ownership over their experiences of giving, receiving, and engaging with love. She carves out a space for their own voices to define the modes through which their stories are told, effectively reconceptualising the ways in which women's encounters with romance could be understood and articulated through verse.

Additionally, we also see Wroth's sonnet sequence making use of conventional Renaissance ideals regarding the gendered virtues attributed to men and women at the time. Once again, rather than strictly endorsing or entirely rejecting them, she refashions and repurposes the functions of these ideals in order to further elucidate the ways in which they impacted women, their identities, and their experiences with love. This is most evident in the recurring motifs of constancy and devotion that Wroth weaves through the narrative of the sonnet sequence, and which play a vital role in tying together its thematic framework. Constancy, as stipulated by Richard Bear, functioned as an 'extension of the medieval virtue of chastity' during the Renaissance and was the primary method through which a woman could establish herself as honourable (line 3, para. 4). Dominant cultural ideologies of the time designated these 'conceptions of constancy as rare in women and optional for men', effectively creating a double standard whereby the virtue of a woman's character could be dictated by her constancy, but a man could still lay claim to righteousness despite a lack of fidelity (Miller 301). It is these particular notions of constancy that Wroth employs in her depiction of Pamphilia as a steadfast lover who remains decidedly firm in her devotion to her beloved, even in the face of his own inconstancy. In fact, the very names of these characters perfectly epitomise this dichotomy, with Pamphilia directly translating to 'all loving' in Greek, and Amphilanthus to 'lover of two' (Bear line 4, para 13). This highlights the centrality of constancy and virtue in Wroth's construction of the lovers' identities, and how the role that each of them plays in navigating their encounters with love is actively defined by the visceral presence or absence of this virtue.

What makes this especially compelling, then, is how it also adheres to Wroth's pattern of reappropriating the literary conventions of her time and reshaping them in order to put forth a reconceptualised understanding of romantic love. We see this in how her presentation of Pamphilia's character aligns itself with the traditional feminine virtue of constancy; and

how her beloved's blatant lack thereof seems to taint the possibility of a happy union between the two with betrayal, grief, and heartache. Whereas the cultural construction of Virtue was typically used as a means to police women, Wroth reclaims it as a means to liberate them from the ideological cages of the patriarchy instead. In depicting Pamphilia's character as virtuous in the most traditional sense of the word, she is setting a precedent that allows women in love to retain their honour even in the face of rejection or betrayal. Thus, the notion of constancy as a virtue is being deployed here as a radical tool to highlight the shortcomings of man, rather than those of woman. This once again reiterates Wroth's overarching concern with reshaping the romantic experience in a way that decentralises the masculine presence and elevates its feminine counterpart to a place of agency and honour instead.

Shakespeare's sonnets, on the other hand, approach notions of constancy and faithfulness in love from a very different angle. His deeply nuanced treatment of fidelity is evident in the first seventeen sonnets of the collection, generally classified by critics as the 'procreation sonnets', which feature the speaker of the poems encouraging his beloved to marry and father children as a way to preserve his beauty (Schoenfeldt 3-4). This can be observed more specifically in 'Sonnet 12', where the beauty of the beloved is likened to aspects of the natural world's beauty, such as the 'brave day', the 'violet' flower, 'lofty trees', and the 'summer's green' (lines 2, 3, 5, 7). The poem proceeds to highlight the fleeting and ephemeral nature of this beauty and how it must eventually fade 'among the wastes of time', just as the beauty of the natural world does (line 10). The sonnet culminates in Shakespeare proclaiming that the only way for his beloved to immortalise his beauty against the ravages of 'time's scythe' is by producing children to inherit it, thus also signifying the volta in the poem's final couplet (line 13). This suggests that, unlike Wroth, Shakespeare does not seem to consider the idea of one's Beloved pursuing a romantic or sexual relationship with another

partner to be a particularly egregious fault, even going so far as to encourage it himself in this case.

However, other Shakespearean sonnets such as ‘Sonnet 129’ and ‘Sonnet 138’—generally classified within the Dark Lady subsection of sonnets—contradict this wilful acceptance of inconstancy on the part of the beloved (Schoenfeldt 3-4). Both the poems adopt a darker mood and a more sinister tone as they condemn the notions of ‘lust’, ‘false-speaking tongue[s]’, and ‘suppressed’ ‘truth[s]’ that facilitate betrayals of this nature (Sonnet 129 line 2, Sonnet 138 line 7-8). It can hence be inferred that Shakespeare’s presentation of the beloved’s inconstancy varies between the earlier group of sonnets dedicated to the ‘fair youth’ and the subsequent Dark Lady sequence (Schoenfeldt 3-4). I propose that a distinction can be drawn based on whether the beloved’s inconstancy allows for the magnitude of the speaker’s love to grow or to diminish. For instance, whilst the fair youth’s ‘breed[ing]’ of children creates a legacy of beauty for the speaker to further devote himself to, the Dark Lady’s inconstancy conversely results in a loss of faith between the speaker and his beloved (Sonnet 12, line 14). Nevertheless, Shakespeare still problematises this by expressing his speaker’s resignation to the inevitability of romantic betrayal and deceit in the final couplet of ‘Sonnet 138’: ‘Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be’ (line 13-14). Shakespeare’s sonnets therefore adopt a multifaceted approach to depicting the Renaissance ideals of virtue and inconstancy in the context of romantic love—allowing them to simultaneously work against and also in favour of the literary conventions from which they emerged. Similarly to Wroth, then, Shakespeare’s sonnets also situate their perspectives in the liminality between a state of active acceptance and of harsher condemnation; both of which highlight the incongruent nature of romantic love further.

To conclude, both Shakespeare and Wroth adopt highly original approaches to their articulation of romantic love, desire, and loss in their collections of sonnets. They manage to

adhere to conventions of the genre and incorporate their voices within the existing literary canon of romantic poetry, whilst simultaneously carving out liminal spaces for their voices to occupy, effectively allowing them to redefine what it means to love and to be loved in verse.

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