

*First Prize Winner in Division Three (400 and 500 level courses)*

# Lady Mary Wroth

A Scandalous, Literate Life

By Frost McGahey

## *Song*

Love, a child, is every crying:  
Please him and he straight is flying,  
Give him, he the more is craving,  
Never satisfied with having;

His desires have no measure,  
Endless folly is his treasure,  
What he promiseth he breaketh,  
Trust not one word that he speaketh;

He vows nothing but false matter,  
And to cozen you he'll flatter:  
Let him gain the hand, he'll leave you,  
And still glory to deceive you;

He will triumph in your wailing,  
And yet cause be of your failing.  
These his virtues are, and slighter  
Are his gifts, his favours lighter:

Feathers are as firm in staying,  
Wolves no fiercer in their preying.  
As a child, then, leave him crying,  
Nor seek him so given to flying.

From the *Countess of Montgomerie's Urania*

## Dorothy Parker

### *Unfortunate Coincidence*

By the time you swear you're his,  
Shivering and sighing,  
And he vows his passion is  
Infinite, undying –  
Lady, make a note of this:  
One of you is lying

### *Men*

They hail you as their morning star  
Because you are the way you are,  
If you return the sentiment,  
They'll try to make you different;  
And once they have you, safe and sound,  
They want to change you all around,  
Your moods and ways they put a curse on;  
They'd make of you another person.  
They cannot let you go your gait;  
They influence and educate.  
They'd alter all that they admired.  
They make me sick, they make me tired.

### *Theory*

Into love and out again,  
Thus I went, and thus I go.  
Spare your voice, and hold your pen –  
Well and bitterly, I know  
All the songs were ever sung,  
All the words were ever said;  
Could it be, when I was young,  
Some one dropped me on my head?

From *Not So Deep As a Well*

When I read Wroth's poem, I was startled to find that this voice was familiar. Reading Donne and Jonson, while pleasurable, was unfamiliar. These were voices centuries old from a male perspective – beautiful, but different. While reading Wroth's poem, I could identify with this woman. I could reach across time and space and understand her feelings. Part of the reason is that I had grown up with the poetry of Dorothy Parker and her amused cynical attitude towards love. Wroth's attitude seemed similar to Parker's. I was intrigued by Wroth and wanted to find out more about her. Who was she? How did she come to write this way? How did she break way from the saccharin Petrarchan love poetry? I had to play detective to put all the pieces together. Here is her story.

She was the eldest daughter of Robert Sidney, Earl of Leicester. Robert was the younger brother of both the poet Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke. Robert also wrote poetry and a volume of his love sonnets was recently discovered and published. He was also a prominent courtier in the reign of James I. Her mother, Barbara, was a Welsh heiress who had brought a large fortune to the family. The family house was Penshurst, one of the great country houses in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. It was a center of literary and cultural activity and of gracious hospitality. Ben Jonson's famous poem *To Penshurst* alludes especially to the last quality.<sup>1</sup> Mary had the privileges of a "formal education during an era when an estimated 90% of Englishwomen were illiterate."<sup>2</sup>

Mary was a very remarkable woman. She was the first English woman to write a

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<sup>1</sup> Norton Topics Online: The Early Seventeenth Century (1603-1660) W. W. Norton & Co. 1998

<sup>2</sup> Mary Hardtke, Lady Mary Wroth, (Duluth : University of Minn., 1999), 1.

sonnet sequence – *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. She wrote one of the first plays ever written by a woman – *Love's Victory* (not published till 1988) – and also wrote the first published work of fiction by an English woman, *The Countess of Mountgomerie's Urania*.<sup>3</sup>

Ben Jonson's poem *To Mary, Lady Wroth*, would make one believe Wroth had an enviable life, but that was not the situation. Her problems started with her marriage to Sir Robert Wroth in 1604. The marriage was arranged for financial reasons by her parents. Wroth had been knighted in 1603 and rose quickly in King James's favor due to his expert hunting skills. Wroth did not share his wife's love of the arts and literature and was a "reputed wastrel, spendthrift, drunkard and womanizer"<sup>4</sup> and the "only book dedication he was ever to receive was "a treatise on mad dogs".<sup>5</sup>

The marriage was unhappy from the start as evidenced by correspondence between her parents. Part of the reason for the happiness may have been Mary's relationship with her first cousin, William Pembroke. Mary and William shared many of the same interests in the arts and literature and had been childhood friends. It is known that Pembroke and Lady Mary continued to share a relationship after their respective marriages. They saw each other regularly at family and court functions.

More evidence of the poor relations between the couple is found in Ben Jonson's observation "My Lady Wroth is unworthily married to a jealous husband"<sup>6</sup> However, as

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<sup>3</sup> Naomi J. Miller, Changing the Subject. Mary Wroth and Figurations of Gender in Early Modern England, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1960), 1.

<sup>4</sup> John Butler and Anniina Jokinen, Lady Mary Wroth (luminarium.org/seven/lit/wroth) Feb. 1998

<sup>5</sup> Hardtke, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, 28.

much of an undesirable husband as he was, it was Robert's favor with King James I that propelled Mary into the center of court life (1605-1611). She gained a coveted role in Jonson's first masque. He also dedicated one of his plays to her.<sup>7</sup> During these court years, Wroth began her writing career with her poems circulating in manuscript. Mary stayed at court while her husband preferred to be at his country estate. After ten years of marriage, Mary's first son was born in 1614. A month later, her husband is dead and he has left her with an enormous debt of \$23,000 (which in today's terms was probably around \$1,000,000). When her young son dies two years later, Mary loses the Wroth estate to one of the Wroth uncles. At this point, she does something very remarkable and scandalous, she moves into Pembroke's London home.

Pembroke was a very dashing, romantic character. He came from one of the wealthiest families<sup>8</sup> in England and had served jail time for refusing to marry the mother of his illegitimate child. He did marry an heiress about the same time that Lady Mary married Wroth. Pembroke was a favorite of King James I and became a statesman, lord chamberlain and a lord steward. He also furthered the exploration and colonization of America.

He was also a poet and patron of Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare. Shakespeare honored Pembroke by dedicating his first folio of plays to Pembroke and

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<sup>7</sup> There has been some speculation, with little evidence to support it, that Lady Mary and Ben Jonson were lovers. After reading some of her sonnets, Jonson wrote "Since I exscribe your sonnets, am become/A better lover, and a much better poet."

<sup>8</sup> His mother was the Countess of Pembroke, a noted patroness of the arts and a poet in her own right. She wrote, translated and published her poetry during an era when few women dared. William was also the nephew of Philip Sidney and was tutored by the poet Samuel Daniel.

his brother Philip Herbert. He could possibly be the “Mr. W.H.” mentioned in the publisher’s dedication of the 1609 edition of the Sonnets. Unfortunately for Wroth, he was also quite a philanderer.

Contemporaries claimed that Pembroke was a special favorite of Queen Anne and that he gained the position of the King’s Lord Chamberlain in 1615 through her mediation. It is interesting that in the romance which Wroth later published, she repeatedly returns to the theme of a jealous, powerful Queen who exiles her weaker rival from the court in order to gain her lover.<sup>9</sup>

Wroth bears Pembroke two illegitimate children, a son and a daughter. This was during a time of a temporary peak in illegitimacy in England, but it still violated social norms in a highly visible way. Her relationship with Pembroke was considered scandalous and she was the subject of gossip and jealousy at the court. In addition, her financial condition prevented her from participating in the lavish court entertainments. It was after Wroth’s retirement from the inner circle at court that she really started to concentrate on writing *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania*. (1618-1620) With its publication in 1621, all hell breaks loose.

Her choice of a secular romance narrative was deemed inappropriate for a woman, but more importantly, she published a *roman a clef*. This is a novel in which real persons and actual events are thinly disguised in the story. A prominent member of the court, Edward, Lord Denny, charged that she used him and his father-in-law as the

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<sup>9</sup>Nandini Das, [Lady Mary Wroth – Biography](http://English.cam.ac.uk/wroth/biography), (English.cam.ac.uk/wroth/biography)

basis for one of her tales.

Letters from that period document the court furor. There very set notions for what was appropriate for a woman to write about and “what right a voice from elsewhere had to depict, let alone attack, the center.”<sup>10</sup> Her gender, her choice of genres and her social position made her an “other”. She was now outside the inner circle of power and she was exposing their faults and foibles to public ridicule. This made her authorship unacceptable. Her novel contained topical allusions to various court scandals and she clearly antagonized some of the most powerful males in King James court. This jeopardized her standing at the court. Denny called her a “Hermaphrodite”.

She was forced to withdraw *Urania* by members of King James court only six months after publication and she had to leave the court in disgrace. *Urania* was not reprinted until 1995.

In the end, the inconstant Pembroke abandons Mary. Very few records about Wroth’s personal life in her later years have survived. She continued to be plagued with serious financial difficulties and had to sell off a large portion of her remaining lands. Given the circumstances, Wroth continued to manage her own financial and personal affairs for the next thirty years with considerable determination. She died in 1651 or 1653. (It has only been since the 1980’s that her pioneering literary creations have begun to attract attention.) Scholarly consensus is that her reputation was so besmirched by the notoriety of *Urania* that she did not try to publish anything after that. Because of the controversy, the publishing door to women was closed for the next forty years until

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<sup>10</sup> Miller, 10.

Margaret Cavendish has her fiction published.

*Urania* is an enormous book, written in lengthy, loose-structured sentences. The first part runs to about 350,000 words; the second part (written a few years later and not published in her lifetime) contains about 240,000 words.<sup>11</sup> The 1621 edition also contains a sequence of 103 sonnets, called *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. *Urania*'s intricate and interwoven story follows the fortune of two central heroines, Pamphilia and Urania.<sup>12</sup> Pamphilia is a semi-autobiographical figure, who inherits the crown and kingdom from her uncle<sup>13</sup> and whose love for her fickle first cousin Amphilanthus occasions much traveling, story-telling and exchange of love lyrics. Part of the book consists of a series of tales that has over 300 hundred characters in them.

In the sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Wroth did something unique.

As one critic describes it:

Wroth breaks from tradition and writes her name into literary history by turning the Petrarchan convention upside down. Wroth becomes the first English writer to reverse the traditional gender roles of lover and beloved in a complete sonnet collection. No longer must the women be the desired, unobtainable, ice-hardened object of the male sonneteer's lust as Wroth inserts her protagonist, Pamphilia, into the commanding role with a feminine voice of her own. Pamphilia is now the possessor of the Petrarchan ideals which had previously been the exclusive property of the male sonneteer.<sup>14</sup>

Although a major theme of the sequence is the troubled love between Pamphilia and the unfaithful Amphilanthus, she does explore other themes. Wroth examines society's

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<sup>11</sup> Das, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Urania was the name of the Muse of Astronomy that Milton used in *Paradise Lost*.

<sup>13</sup> The uncle would be Wroth's actual uncle – Philip Sidney who did leave his niece a legacy.

<sup>14</sup> Hardtke, 2.

sexual double standard for men and women that allows the man (i.e. Pembroke) to remain at court while the woman is punished for adultery.

The book is also the first extended portrait of a woman by a woman in English. In addition, the heroines are unusual in that they are seen consciously searching for their own identities, which they perceive as being apart from the men in the lives.<sup>15</sup>

Mary Wroth's poetry is similar to Dorothy Parker's in that both women can distance themselves from love and comment on the absurdity of it. Both were urban sophisticates who were in and out of love affairs and marriages. These women had intelligence and self-knowledge that let them stand back from the turmoil of their emotional lives and comment with wit and insight. There is a sly humour in their poetry coupled with an element of truth. As Parker said, "Wit has truth in it."<sup>16</sup> She also said that humor takes in many things including criticism, a disciplined eye and a wild mind.

A professor once asked our English class whether Wroth deserved to be in a collection of 17<sup>th</sup> Century poetry. She is not the equal of Shakespeare and Donne, but I think she holds her own with Jonson and other 17<sup>th</sup> Century poets. She does merit a place in poetic history. She is a remarkable woman who gains "a place as the first in a long line of women forced to take up the pen to stave off creditors."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Butler & Jokinen, 24.

<sup>16</sup> From Dorothy Parker, interview with Marion Capron, in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. Ed. Malcolm Cowley, New York: Viking, 1958, 69

<sup>17</sup> Hardtke, 3.

