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Discuss the ways in which gender roles and expectations have influenced attitudes towards love and desire in lyric poetry you have studied on this module.

Felicity Cook

Love and desire are central themes of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition, particularly that of an unrequited lover experiencing extreme confusion and torment as they deal with an agonising, all-consuming love. Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*, composed in the 1580s, lies within this tradition, with the titular Astrophel pining over and chasing his beloved Stella. Lady Mary Wroth, Sidney's niece, published *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* in 1621, and it is strongly influenced by her uncle's sonnet sequence. However, where Sidney commences a nuanced, complex meditation upon the tension between desire and reason, between Neoplatonic love and animalistic lust, Wroth maintains a constant, chaste ideal of a love that transcends the body and its urges, conjoining two souls. I argue that the freedom and flexibility of viewpoints in Sidney's sequence is afforded as he was less likely to be criticised for his sexual honesty as a man in Early modern England. In this essay, I focus on Wroth's sonnet corona, found within *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, titled 'A Crowne of Sonnets Dedicated to Love', and stanzas 64-76 of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, in order to assess the extent to which the gender of each poet influences their approach to love and desire.

Lady Mary Wroth's sonnet corona is an illustrative expression of her persona Pamphilia's intense interiority, her narrative rooted in inward suffering and entrapment within love's labyrinth, which is a central metaphor. Structurally, the corona is cyclical, the last line of each stanza becoming the next stanza's first. Wroth depicts a female sense of self through

this labyrinth that 'isolated, enclosed, difficult, and complex'.[1] Pamphilia's experience of love for her male beloved is acutely personal; Wroth presents the all-consuming love an act of almost religious learning, self-reflection and enlightenment. With a decentralisation of the male beloved, 'A Crowne of Sonnets Dedicated to Love' is meditation on the concept of love: a philosophical undertaking, focusing on the female poetic speaker rather than an active chase. The first line of the corona positions Pamphilia within a 'strange Labyrinth', a metaphorical landscape frequently used in Petrarchan sonnets.[2] Wroth uses this 'Labyrinth' in order to convey Pamphilia's psychological distress, confusion, almost petrification as she struggles to move or decide what to do, stuck in a sense of Petrarchan suspension. She asks, 'Let mee goe forward' [1. 4], 'Let mee turne back' [1. 6], knowing that to 'stand still is harder' [1. 8]. The repeated imperative 'Let mee' conveys a sense of desperation, of urgency yet complete indecision as she contemplates how to continue, where to go; Pamphilia's experience of love and desire leads to confusion, error, complexity, difficulty - all systematic reversals of the traditional Petrarchan lover's folly. She knows she has to 'indure [her suffering] without allay or helpe' [1. 11-12], as she will become a better person for it. This understanding of gain through pain, self-growth through mental distress, is continued throughout the corona. In its fourth stanza, Pamphilia readies herself to 'taste this pleasing sting, seek with all care / For happy smarting is it with small paine. / Such as although it pierce your tender heart, / And burne, yet burning you will loue the smart' [4. 10-14]. This pattern of binary opposition, of tasting a 'pleasing sting', seeking 'happy smarting', reflects Wroth's sacrificial dedication to chaste love, learning to 'loue' the 'sting' and 'burning' of love, to live alongside it. This suffering brings great benefits, a kind of love that brings personal completion and understanding. 'Loue brings fruite which none repent' [2. 7], brings 'blessings light' [2. 9], the 'feruent fire of zeale, the roote of peace' [2. 10], this semantic field of religious, seraphic language encompassing

[1] Mary Moore, 'The Labyrinth as Style in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*', Studies of English Literature, 1500-1900, 38:1 (1998), 109-125 (p. 110).

[2] Lady Mary Wroth, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2007), p. 96, stanza 1, line 1. [All subsequent quotations to be referenced in-text by stanza. line number].

personal, spiritual growth. The connotation of 'fruite' with procreation and childbearing is deepened when Wroth describes love as a 'wombe for ioyes increase' [2. 12]. Wendy Wall, quoted by Rosalind Smith, notes that as a woman writing in Early modern England, Wroth 'self-consciously meditates on the dilemma of what cannot be said'.[3] Knowing she would be scrutinised if her appreciation of love appeared unwholesome, she seems to root her desires in traditional expectations of women, such as childbearing.

In the third stanza of the corona, Wroth describes love as 'pure, as purest white' [3. 2]. This introduces a gilded, dazzling monorhyme in third stanza, shimmering with repetition of 'might', 'white', 'light', reinforcing the clarity, brightness and enlightenment one can gain through love, as well as its almost divine purity. This religious sense is continued throughout the corona, where Wroth describes how 'diuine love' [5. 8] leads to 'happinesse, and best can learne us, meanes how to deserue […] yet doth our hiden'st thoughts discerne' [5. 10-12]. Combined with language of 'gaine' [5. 13] and 'profitt' [5. 14], a clear portrait of self-improvement and self-reflection through love emerges. Wroth portrays love as a force that not only fosters self-appreciation but also deepens one's love for oneself; 'it doth inrich the wits, and make you see that in your selfe which you knew not before' [6. 9-10]. This adeptly navigates the Petrarchan tradition; Pamphilia is still an unrequited lover, plagued with torment and confusion, but by transcending the physical body, moving towards the emotional and spiritual, Wroth creates a heightened, almost religiously devotional experience that avoids the condemnation that would be received as a woman writing in traditional Petrarchan verse.

On the other hand, Philip Sidney's persona of *Astrophel and Stella*, Astrophel, experiences love externally, suffering, pining, chasing and hunting Stella, his beloved who has inflicted this effect upon him. His relationship with love is negative, it seems to drain him, take from him, leave him ravaged and desecrated. In stanza 65, Love is described as 'vnkind', it

[3] Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 331, cited in Rosalind Smith, 'Lady Mary Wroth's "Pamphilia to Amphilanthus": The Politics of Withdrawal', *English Literary Renaissance*, 30:3 (2000), 408-431 (p. 413).

hears his 'cries' of pain and ignores him.[4] Astrophel addresses Love with a sense of familiarity, he seems to have shown it kindness in the past, he has 'lodgd' [65. 7] it in his heart, but now it has grown 'too, too wise' [65. 6]. It took his eyes, made him blind, and Sidney's Astrophel feels this betrayal keenly. Love has almost been personified into a monstrous, destructive figure. This stanza, similarly to Wroth's, features a stretching monorhyme in which Astrophel mourns for his vision, his life, in agony: 'Mine eyes! My light, my heart, my life, alas!' [65. 9]. However, unlike the sonorous, dazzling effect this has in Wroth's corona, the repeated rhyme laces the stanza with a sense of desperation, clawing for relief from the 'tedious burden of long wo in weaken'd minds', the 'eerie image' [66. 2-4] of his loss. The destructive and overwhelming nature of his love has consumed him. However, love is reignited along with hope in stanza 66, when 'Stellas eyes' send him 'beames of blisse, Looking on [him] while [he] lookt other way' [66. 11-12]. Sidney's presentation of Love is a force that relies upon hope, upon external stimulation and obsession with another, Stella. The chase is on, and 'oceans of delight' [69. 4] begin to flow within him. Unlike Wroth's Pamphilia, whose presentation of love is almost exclusively internal and spiritual, Sidney's love radiates outwards with a centralisation on Stella, framing love as a pursuit akin to hunting or chasing. The imagery of Stella's eyes fleeing, reminiscent of a hunted animal, emphasises the possessive nature of his love, wherein his emotional fulfilment hinges on his perceived ability to own her. This possessiveness leads to poetic inspiration in in stanza 74, in which Astrophel's expressions, thoughts and words flow with 'so smooth an ease' [74. 9], 'inspir'd with *Stelllas* kiss' [74. 14]. This shift raises critical considerations about gender dynamics in early modern lyric poetry; the ease with which the male poet can draw inspiration from overtly sexual experiences stands in stark contrast to the position of the female speaker. As Natasha Distiller claims, 'what is enabling for the male poet is compromising for the female speaker.'[5] The discrepancy

[4] Philip Sidney, 'Sir P.S.: His Astrophel and Stella', *The Project Gutenberg*, p. 27, stanza 65, ll. 1-2. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/56375/56375-h/56375-h.htm > [Accessed 11th January 2024] [All subsequent quotations to be referenced in-text by stanza. line number].

[5] Natasha Distiller, ''There was a woman known to be so bold': Gender in Petrarchism', *The Southern African Society for Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 16:1 (2006), 61-91 (82).

highlights societal norms that afforded creative liberty to male poets while constraining female speakers. This is only furthered in Sidney's central conflict of *Astrophel and Stella*: the tension between desire and reason, between Neoplatonic courtly love, and animalistic lust, rooted in physicality. Whilst Sidney's Astrophel values Stella's virtue, and their platonic relationship, his human desire constantly undercuts the chastity and purity encouraged by Stella and society, and the powerful, burning light of Astrophel's external love transforms and morphs into something more sexual.

There is a cosmological preoccupation with eyes echoing throughout the poem; stanza 68's claim that Stella is 'the onely planet of [his] light, / Light of [his] life, and life of [his] desire' [68. 1-2]. This close association of 'light' with 'desire' is the antithesis of the purity and clarity of the light in Wroth's Pamphilia's love. This light begins to burn up, and in stanza 76 Stella is again described as the 'only light of joy, the only warmth of love' [76. 4], the 'flamie-glistring lights' of her eyes causing Astrophel physical pain as his 'heart cries, oh! It burnes, [his] eyes now dazl'd be' [76. 11]. The dazzlement has disorientated Astrophel, as if the brilliance of her eyes has momentarily overwhelmed or blinded him. This could symbolise the overpowering influence of desire on reason, clarity and perception. The strength of his physical desire creates unbearable heat that needs to be cooled, satiated. But 'no wind, no shade can coole' it [76. 12]. It is almost stronger than nature. The implicitly sexual undertones of the stanza become more pronounced as he expresses his wishes to bed Stella in order 'to quench in [him] the noble fire' [68. 7]; 'short breath, long looks, staid feet, and aching hed, pray that my sunne goe downe with meeker beames to bed' [76. 13-14]. The semantic juxtaposition of 'short breath' and 'long looks', breathless anticipation and lingering gazes, combine with 'staid feet' to create an image of Petrarchan stasis, suspended in sexual desire. This ultimate triumph of desire over reason and Neoplatonic love is a repeated pattern throughout the passage. While stanza 71 examines how virtue dwells in Stella's beauty and goodness, her 'faire lines which true goodnesse show', 'sweetest soueraigntie / Of reason' [71. 6], the 'inward sunne' [71. 8] that shines out from behind her eyes, the volta at the end introduces a striking tonal shift and

effortlessly undercuts the paradigm of the rest of the stanza. Despite the expectation that beauty should guide us towards virtue, the Edenic world of beauty and goodness is disrupted by the persistent cry of Desire: 'But, ah, Desire still cries, Giue me some food' [71. 14]. This marks a crucial departure from Neoplatonic, chaste love, asserting that desire is as essential to human existence as sustenance, simply another kind of hunger. The inclusion of 'ah' indicates the emotional, frustrated urgency experienced by Astrophel; it is human, monosyllabic, intensifying the pace of the stanza, almost reflecting a racing heartbeat. The acknowledgment of desire, with its animalistic and sexual undertones, challenges the dichotomy between chaste love and physical longing. The conflict portrayed reflects a struggle marked by uncertainty and confusion, ultimately pointing to the triumph of unavoidable sexual desire in the narrative of courtly love.

Neoplatonic love is heavenly, celestial, striving for transcendence and the ascent of the soul through noble and spiritual devotion to another person, as opposed to yearning for the physical body of the beloved. Wroth's Neoplatonic paradigm is defined by chastity, shunning the animalistic desire propounded by Sidney's Astrophel. As a woman in a Renaissance context, Wroth's Pamphilia does not have the same access to the language of Petrarchan love and desire as Sidney's Astrophel. While it is hard to generalise about the position of women in comparison to men in early modernity, it 'is clear that their sexuality was in need of rigorous control'.[6] This corona, the first to be published by an English woman, demonstrates the difficulty for women to engage with this male-dominated, Petrarchan desire. Distiller suggests that 'the sequence stages an engagement with the Petrarchan rules of speaking desire that reveals the profoundly gendered nature of those rules. [Wroth's] poetic speaker has to manage the contradiction of being both actively and publicly desiring (as the Petrarchan form by definition inscribes), and a woman who merits admiration – mutually exclusive positions within this social and poetic framework'.[7] Unlike Sidney's 'Desire' that cries

[6] Ibid. p. 68.
[7] Ibid. p. 72.

out for attention and satisfaction, the flames that require quenching, Wroth describes the fire of Love as a 'sweete flame, which harts inuite to moue' [7. 3], kindling '*Cupids* fire' [7. 4], 'the heat of wishes form'd by Loue' [7. 6]. This fire does not destroy, or annihilate or control; rather, it 'doth aspire, increase, and foster all delights' [7. 7-8]. These 'delights' are not sexual in nature, in fact Wroth states that 'If Lust be counted Loue 'tis falsely nam'd, By wickednesse' [9. 9-10]. This seems to be a very clear rebuttal of the blurred relationship between lust and love in Sidney's Astrophel and Stella, in which Astrophel admits that when it comes to 'Desire' and 'pure love', 'one from the other [he] scarcely can discrie' [72. 1-3]. Wroth makes it clear that love should be clear, constant, pure; love when mixed with lust is bred on 'vnwholsome grownd, vnprofitably pleasing, and vnsound' [10. 13-14]. This Neoplatonic view of love is rooted in chastity, a value expected of women or else put them at risk of condemnation.

Throughout the entirety of *Astrophel and Stella*, Sidney's Astrophel plunges himself into abjection for the sake of love, willingly spiralling into extreme humility, submission, crazed, animalistic desire that deconstructs all courtly compliment and Neoplatonic aspiration. He surrenders to the depths of disgrace if it means securing Stella's love. In stanza 64, he implores Fortune to 'lay on [him] her worst disgrace, / Let folke orecharg'd with braine against [him] crie; / Let clouds bedimme [his] face, breake in his] eye' [64. 3-5]. His love for Stella becomes an all-consuming force, propelling him to the point of self-annihilation, a descent into true 'disgrace' that reveals a profound disregard for his own physical and emotional wellbeing. He further describes himself as 'the ruins of [Stella's] conquest' [67. 3], portraying himself as a crumbling mass broken down by the intense force of Stella's presence. There is a conspicuous absence of self-worth or self-respect in his expressions, a stark contrast to the meticulous deliberation evident in Wroth's Pamphilia when contemplating love. Catherine Bates states that 'Astrophel is not only overmastered, the willing victim of a superior power, he is also emasculated', identifying him as a part of the *amour courtois* tradition as a male

courtly lover who is subjugated to a woman.[8] Whether this abjection is attributed to callousness, or carelessness, or masochistic desires, it was only afforded to men in early modern England. Astrophel's unabashed display of self-deprecation, of willing 'clouds' to 'bedimme [his] face' [64. 5], is almost directly opposed by Wroth's Pamphilia, who dwells in love where 'no cloud can appaere to dimme [its] light' [3. 3]. There is a refusal for any darkness or blemish to seep through into the purity of Neoplatonic love, for 'he that shuns love, doth love himself the lesse' [7. 14]. It is firmly positioned against self-abasing love, defending true, constant love, instead condemning the passion that leads to inconstancy and self-humiliation.

In conclusion, the exploration of love and desire in Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* reveals intriguing contrasts shaped by the gender perspectives of the respective poets. Wroth's corona navigates the gendered constraints of early modern society, and presents a deliberate rebuttal of the blurred lines between lust and love displayed by Sidney. Her Neoplatonic view of love, rooted in chastity, highlights the societal expectations placed on women and the care required by female speakers when engaging with traditional conventions of Petrarchan desire. Wroth and Sidney present distinct perspectives on love and desire, shaped by their gender roles and societal expectations. Ultimately, Wroth's inward, spiritual *exploration of* love contrasts with Sidney's external, passionate *pursuit for* love.

[8] Catherine Bates, 'Astrophil and the Manic Wit of the Abject Male', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 41:1 (2001), 1-24 (p. 1).

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