Echoes of Desire
Dubrow, Heather

Published by Cornell University Press

Dubrow, Heather.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/58020

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2088950
CHAPTER FOUR

PETRARCHAN EXECUTORS:
SIDNEY, SHAKESPEARE, WROTH

I

Thus Joseph Hall introduces his pioneering contribution to formal verse satire. Sir Philip Sidney, however, scripts literary history and his own role within it very differently:

Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitfull showers upon my sunne-burn'd braine.

(Astrophil and Stella, 1.7–8)²

Both poets could stake a contested yet plausible claim to the titles of har­binger and progenitor. Some previous writers had composed formal verse satires and sonnets; nonetheless, Hall and Sidney, unlike their native pre­decessors, fashioned entire collections of poems in their chosen genres and in so doing introduced many innovations. Neither writer, however, offers a balanced evaluation of his relationship to his forebears and putative suc­cessors. On the one hand, Hall dubiously appropriates the title of first

English satirist and constructs himself as the explorer, confidently striding forth, while on the other, Sidney presents himself as variously stumbling over and rejecting the feet of others. Hall looks forward with confidence, even cockiness, whereas Sidney claims, though with a wit that undermines that claim, that he is nervously looking back over his shoulder. Hall fashions himself as potential patriarch, and Sidney as rebellious son. Why, then, is Sidney so concerned to define himself against and distinguish himself from other poets? Or, to put it another way, why is his sequence one of the most intense and hence most suggestive instances of diacritical desire in English Petrarchism? The answers to those questions are rooted both in his attitudes to Petrarchism and in the nexus of social, political, and aesthetic problems which informs *Astrophil and Stella*.

A more detailed examination of the two opening sonnets adumbrates many of those answers. These poems have been explicated so often that they may appear translucent at this point, but in fact some of their most significant lines have generally received only cursory or partial readings. Additional transgressive implications slide back and forth along the polished surfaces of those lines or hover in their depths, demonstrating in particular Sidney's ambivalence about poesy, his preoccupation with the slippery connections between success and failure, and the relationship of those issues to gender.

```
Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,
That the deare She might take some pleasure of my paine:
Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine,
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertaine:
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitfull showers upon my sunne-burn'd braine.

But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay,
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Studie's blowes,
And others' feete still seem'd but strangers in my way.
Thus great with child to speake, and helpesse in my throwes,
Biting my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,
"Foole," said my Muse to me, "looke in thy heart and write."
```

In interpreting this poem we confront two methodological problems that are repeatedly posed by *Astrophil and Stella*. First, in reading the interplay between success and failure in this and other lyrics in the sequence, should
one assume a close bond between Astrophil and Philip Sidney? Sidney, according to some critics, diagnoses and demonstrates in Astrophil, his "speaking picture," faults of which he himself should not stand accused.³ Thus whether or not one agrees with the scholars who find in the sequence a Christian rebuttal the speaker's cupiditas,⁴ one could make a case that Sidney does not suffer from that sin. Yet that argument is undermined by the sequence itself: much as Astrophil and Stella anticipates the questions a reader might raise about the paradox of grounding success in narrating one's failures, so it speaks to the interpretive problem of the relationship between poet and persona. For when the extraordinary Eighth Song collapses the third- and first-person pronouns—"Leaving him so passion rent, . . . That therewith my song is broken" (102–104)—Sidney is hinting again at the implication embedded in the very name "Astrophil": his attempts to distinguish himself from his speaker are at best limited. To be sure, he tries with partial success to create a critical distance between himself and Astrophil—yet another instance of the agenda of externalization and bifurcation which operates on so many other levels throughout the sequence—but his own emotions interfere with that agenda. In short, here, as in the sequences examined in Chapter 3, speaker and poet are certainly distinct, and yet the boundaries between them are once again as unstable as those between Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism.

Second, should the reader interpret the interplay of success and failure in this and subsequent sonnets in the sequence as merely a sign of Astrophil's canniiness? Perhaps, as some critics have asserted, Astrophil's repeated laments about his own limitations are simply feints in the game of winning Stella.⁵ This reading, which emphasizes male power and dominance, is attractive given the intense training in rhetorical strategies which Sidney, like many of his contemporaries, had received. But it is surely significant that those strategies for wooing Stella do not succeed: their laments of defeat are self-fulfilling prophecies. Indeed, as Pyrocles's cross-dressing re-


minds us, Sidney understands as well as any writer how readily the mask becomes the face, how frequently we turn into what we pretend to be. Hence it is more precise to argue that Sidney attempts to deploy admissions of failure in some spheres to win victories in others, but with only partial and limited success. For finally neither the reader nor the speaker can distinguish rhetorical pretenses of inadequacy from demonstrations of it, much as observers cannot readily distinguish Pyrocles from Zelmane when he assumes that identity.

However one resolves these two interpretive problems, the opening sonnet clearly exemplifies many of the strengths of the sequence that will follow. A reading that aims to untangle the knotty ambivalences hidden in the texture of this poem, as mine will do, must first emphasize that on the whole it is woven with sophistication and skill. The carefully wrought gradatio in the opening lines, for example, fulfills the very goal it establishes, that is, bringing pleasure to a reader. Yet if the sonnet illustrates its author's command of rhetoric, it also embodies his, or his speaker's, emotional instability: the abrupt reversal in the final line, like the similar reversals in Sonnet 5, Sonnet 71, and others, mimes the abruptness of love and desire. For Sidney's swerving and skidding conclusions enact syntactically and structurally the way an unexpected encounter with the beloved, even an unexpected glance or memory, can jolt and delight. The whole earth may move only three times for lovers, but the ground beneath our feet shakes far more often, and Sidney's anticlosural reversals aptly evoke that very process.6

This text is unstable in other, less familiar ways as well. "I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe" (5) is a more complex assertion than it might appear. Although paint may merely signify the process of representation, in the sixteenth century as today it also carried meanings such as "to give a false colouring or complexion to" and "to feign,"7 denotations activated in this context by the adjoining word "face" and consequent associations with the controversial subject of cosmetics. Hence the line introduces unresolved questions about art that conceals and deceives and art that disguises pain, questions to which Sidney shortly returns, as will we. But for now we may wonder in what way words that disguise


7OED, s.v. "paint."
and cover over are “fit” (5) and what relationship art bears to nature when it “paints” in this sense.

The poem concludes on an apparently closural answer that is craftily painted in all these senses. A generation of Sidney scholars has warned us to read the final line—“’Foole,’ said my Muse to me, ‘looke in thy heart and write’”—as an allusion not to romantic emotion but to the image of Stella within Astrophil’s heart, an interpretation that Neil L. Rudenstine nuances with the reminder that it does not preclude some reference to genuine emotion. Fair enough. But, as the puns on “touch” in Sonnet 9 and similar wordplay in many other sonnets remind us, antanacalsis is one of Sidney’s favorite kinswomen. Given that affinity and the fact that the prevocalic h was apparently sometimes silent in Elizabethan England, surely a play on “art” and “heart” is present. In one sense it represents a logical culmination to the rest of the poem. Thus, since the phrase includes yet another trochaic inversion (“thy art”; emphasis added) in a line already packed with metrical variation, the line seems to suggest a contrast between Sidney’s art and that of other poets and hence an anticipation of the interest in diacritical desire and innovation which characterizes his anti-Petrarchan poems. Similarly, the aural identification of Stella’s image and Sidney’s art intensifies the compliment to Stella which is overtly expressed in the line: she is not merely the Muse inspiring his art but also its embodiment.

On another level, however, this same pun deconstructs the very opposition that Sidney has apparently been concerned to establish, here and elsewhere in his canon, between art and that best representative of nature, Stella herself. If the seat of her image is equated with his art, the seemingly stable boundary between deriving inspiration from Stella and from aesthetic strategies collapses; the writer whose Apology for Poetry praises Antonius and Crassus for the art that conceals art here conceals “art” within his own

---

8Patricia Fumerton argues from a different perspective that the poem undercutss its claim to present pure, unmediated feeling; she notes that the Muse speaks for Sidney in the final line (Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], pp. 102–103).
13In The “Inward” Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), chap. 4, Anne Ferry discusses Sidney’s preoccupation with the heart from a different perspective, arguing that he and Shakespeare manifest a new preoccupation with the inability of language to express inner being.
heart, here hides his craft, “bravely maskt” (3.2) as Stella. My point is not
that the pun in question is a primary meaning—it remains elusive at best—but that its presence, however flickering and fleeting, undercuts the stability
of language and the sincerity of its manipulators. Moreover, it implicitly
equates ostensibly unmediated personal emotion with the mediations of art
and thus also calls into question the stability of the subject. “I am not I”
(45.14) indeed, and poststructuralism could have taught Sidney nothing he
did not already know and manifest here about threats to subjectivity.14

Allusions to children and other family members recur throughout the
sequence, but nowhere are they more tantalizing than in the poem at hand.
We should, as critics have pointed out, trace “sunne-burn’d” (8) not only
to Sidney’s darker redaction of Thomas Wilson’s trope for imitation but
also to a pun on the term for a male child.15 The sonnet also describes
invention as “Nature ‘s child” (10), implicitly alludes to a schoolboy in
“trewand” (13), and evokes a stepmother and a woman in labor. Cristina
Malcolmson, adducing object relations theory, argues that Sidney defines
desire as in part familial and thus relates the development of the self to
disillusionment with the mother.16 Certainly the repeated allusions to fa-
milial roles, here and elsewhere in Sidney’s canon, justify psychoanalytic
inquiries. In this instance, however, the family romance is complicated by
ambivalence towards not only the maternal role but also the artistic role
that Sidney is assuming. The anxiety of influence that distinguishes his
poem from Hall’s is, I would argue, deflected here from literary fathers to
a stepmother, a figure often assigned the role of whipping boy.17 The step-
mother may represent both Sidney’s threatening progenitors and Sidney
himself. Doubts about the legitimacy of his literary undertaking, grounded
in the many reservations expressed in the Apology for Poetry about poesy in

14Compare Gary F. Waller’s argument that both Petrarchism and Protestantism involve
decentered selves (“The Rewriting of Petrarch: Sidney and the Languages of Sixteenth-

15On the echo of Wilson, see Russell M. Brown, “Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella,” Ex-
pliactor, 32 (1971), item 21; and David Kalstone, Sidney’s Poetry: Contexts and Interpretations

16Malcolmson, “Politics and Psychoanalysis.”

17On using stepmothers to express aggression originally intended for mothers, see Bruno
general and lyric in particular, may spur him to evoke a figure who is doubly dubious: a stepmother is female and is often seen as a familial usurper. To Sidney and other members of his generation, who had witnessed the loss and replacement of mothers in the wake of the mortality crisis of 1557–1559, such references to stepmothers must have been especially resonant.

Having identified with the errant schoolboy, he proceeds almost immediately to construct himself as the woman in labor, an abrupt shift that foreshadows the shifts in other kinds of power relationships which recur throughout the sequence. In one sense, this merely continues the deflection present in the reference to the “step-dame Studie” (10): resentful of powerful literary progenitors and ambivalent about expressing that resentment, he rechannels tensions about paternal figures towards a less powerful but perhaps more threatening maternal authority and then diminishes that authority by presenting her as “helplesse” (12). Thus the regendering facilitates delimiting the power he fears. At the same time, however, may not the shift from the schoolboy to the obstetrical patient enact an autobiographical allegory about this moment in Sidney’s own career? Having started out in texts such as Certaine Sonnets as the “sunne-burn’d” pupil, he is now ready to assume the role of creator by composing a major sonnet sequence, but his anxiety about doing so leads him to present himself as suffering mother-to-be, not confident father. In short, then, rather than simply segueing from a playful yet painful description of the poet’s failures to a tribute to Stella, the poem introduces into the sequence anxieties that are not definitively resolved by the final line, particularly those about the failures that art may represent in more than one sense of that verb.

Indeed, the succeeding sonnet expresses entrapment not only in love but also in and by art and thus draws our attention to the connection between those dilemmas. Its opening, as many readers have observed, demonstrates Sidney’s independence from the conventions of love at first sight. Admitting his subservience and associating loss of social position with loss of national identity, he compares himself to a “slave-borne Muscovite” (10). Sidney proceeds to introduce a preoccupation that is to recur throughout the sequence: the shame involved in both experiencing and, even worse, accepting enslavement.

It is telling, however, that Sidney focuses here on the process of describing—or painting—that tyranny: “I call it praise to suffer Tyrannie” (11;

21Richard C. McCoy, however, argues that this image represents a further regression (Sir Philip Sidney: Rebellion in Anadie [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979], p. 76).
emphasis added). This allusion prepares us for the focus on self-deception and the deception of others on which the poem concludes:

And now employ the remnant of my wit,  
To make my selfe beleeve, that all is well,  
While with a feeling skill I paint my hell.  

(12–14)

The final line of this poem, like the comparable allusion to painting in the previous sonnet, on one level refers merely to mimetic representation but on another level suggests the process of fairing the foul that Shakespeare was to find so threatening. That line, again like its counterparts in Shakespeare’s sonnets, also suggests the slippage between deceiving oneself and others. These parallels anticipate the somewhat different reference to hell at the end of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129 (“To shun the heav’n that leads men to this hell” [14]) and in so doing invite us to ask whether Sidney’s hell might in some way allude to its source, the heavenly Stella, whose name is repeatedly echoed in the sounds of the couplet? The respect with which most of the other poems describe her immediately enjoins us to consider that reading unlikely—yet the very fact that it seems so unlikely may be another version of painting a hell so that it appears heavenly.

The opening two sonnets, then, introduce queries about the relationship of success and failure, the perils of art, and the connections of those problems to gender which will arise throughout the sequence. That relationship between success and failure is, as I have been arguing, at the core of the Petrarchan tradition: all sequences pivot on the poet’s attempts to succeed in the sense of winning the lady and the consequences of his failure to do so. But no other English sequence is quite as involved with these two terms as is Sidney’s, perhaps in part because of his keen awareness of his own “great expectations” and of how they had been destroyed by the marriage of the earl of Leicester in 1578 and the subsequent birth of his son. Having opened on a poem that focuses on failure, he proceeds later

19 All citations from Shakespeare’s sonnets are to Stephen Booth, ed., Shakespeare’s Sonnets (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

20 I am indebted to Nona Fienberg for the observation that Stella’s name is inscribed in these lines.

21 On the consequences of this marriage, see Katherine Duncan-Jones, Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), esp. pp. 156–157 and chap. 9. In “Turning Others’ Leaves: Astrophil’s Untimely Defeat,” Spencer Studies, 10 (1992), 197–212, Christopher Martin notes the emphasis on waste, delay, and defeat in the sequence; his observation that Sidney often attacks others for his own faults also parallels my argument, though from a different perspective.
in the sequence to present his own verse as a source and symbol of both his power (his verbal agility comes to represent sexual ability, as Margreta de Grazia among others points out) and his powerlessness. According to the traditional rhetorical analyses of the suasive force of poesy, Astrophil yields a mighty weapon and yields it with consummate skill. At the same time, the sequence repeatedly reminds us of his failures as both a poet and a lover. In addition, these poems draw attention to many other arenas in which contestants, literal or figurative, struggle for success—tournaments, courtly politics, and so on.

In Shakespeare's Sonnets, as in Petrarch's poetry, narrativity is implicated in those struggles. But here, unlike Petrarch's poetry, its role is the straightforward one critics of nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts have generally assigned to it: the ability to narrate both represents and produces other forms of mastery. Thus Sidney repeatedly uses mythological narratives etiologically: in the eighth sonnet, for example, his ability to craft an urbane story about love's emigration from Greece to Stella's face suggests his own detachment and power, even while he is admitting that he himself is now Cupid's hotel room. The panache of his narrative skills enables and justifies the culmination of the poem, in which he transforms his own love wound into an injury experienced by Cupid—"He burnt unawares his wings, and cannot fly away" (14)—a deflection that anticipates patterns elsewhere in the sequence. Similarly, in Sonnet 17, when narrating the story of his falling in love, he constructs Cupid as an unhappy child, revising his source, a neo-Latin epigram by Pontano, to play up the god's childishness and dependency. In short, Sidney deploys narratives about his own failure to achieve a kind of success. Yet, characteristically, rather than denying that paradox, he draws attention to it. In particular, Sonnet 34 renders what must have been internal doubts about such narratives into an externalized dramatic dialogue: "Art not ashamed to publish thy disease? Nay, that may breed my fame, it is so rare" (5–6).

The dynamics of success and failure in the sequence are also manifest in the power struggles around which it is structured. The obvious, overt

---

one, the contest between Stella and Astrophil, is refracted in battles between Astrophil and the court wits or between Cupid and his mother. These struggles are characterized above all by their volatility and unpredictability—victories are often Pyrrhic, and apparent conquests are limited and temporary. Many different and conflicting types of power and arenas for winning it are uneasily juxtaposed. Thus in Sonnet 49 Sidney plays the equestrian paradigm for passion, a commonplace that can be traced back to Plato, against the tale of himself as victorious rider:

I on my horse, and Love on me doth trie
   Our horsmanships, while by strange worke I prove
   A horsman to my horse, a horse to Love.

{1–3}

As Clark Hulse aptly observes, the sequence is based on a “complex and pluralistic transaction” among varied power centers. Or, to return to an earlier debate, to privilege the “act of public mastery” in these poems over the poet’s portrayal of himself “as humble suitor to a dominating lady” is to privilege certain contemporary assumptions about hegemony over the more indeterminate and dynamic workings of power in late sixteenth-century England.

Those contemporary assumptions do, however, help us to interpret the politics of Sidney’s interplay between success and failure and power and powerlessness by directing our attention to his preoccupation with dependence, which at its outer limits descends to total helplessness. Richard C. McCoy, extending his valuable analysis of submissiveness and authority in Sidney’s prose, has emphasized Astrophil’s submission to Stella. More precisely, however, that is but part of a larger pattern in the sequence which can better be evaluated as dependence than submissiveness. Sidney depends on rhetorical authorities and on the image of Stella, chides other writers for their dependence on their forebears (“Pindare’s Apes” [3.3]), mocks Cupid for his boyish dependence, and repeatedly evokes images of dependent children. Whether or not the Fifth Song was originally written

---

28McCoy, Sir Philip Sidney, chap. 3.
for *Astrophil and Stella*, its connections between dependency, threatening, and being threatened recur throughout the sequence (as well as in the texts by Lady Mary Wroth, Sidney's niece, to which we will turn shortly, and in the "ugly beauty" poems we will examine in Chapter 5). Again, some critics have attempted to dismiss allusions to dependence as a clever game that in fact ensures domination, and once more that explanation is only partially true. For one thing, it ignores an even more ominous agenda: acknowledging dependence on Stella entails not only complimenting her overtly but also blaming her covertly for the demands of the infected (and erected) will. More to our purposes, to the extent that admissions of dependency are a game, neither Sidney nor Astrophil wins it completely. Associating dependency with the court, the queen, and his literary predecessors, Sidney expresses fears of it throughout his career and nowhere more than in his sonnet sequence. He variously parlays those fears into a modicum of reassurance by presenting them as a comic turn in the first sonnet and deflecting them onto Cupid, who is constructed as a helpless, dependent child in such poems as Sonnet 17, or onto other lovers, who are labeled "babes" in Sonnet 16 (7). And he crafts a counterdiscourse that allows him to rewrite the dependence that he controls only imperfectly elsewhere in the sequence.

Just as the preoccupations with failure and dependency in Sonnet 1 recur throughout the sequence, so too do the aesthetic questions raised there reappear in many later poems. If Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* explicitly defends lyric from its critics, it implicitly incorporates its author's own reservations and anxieties (notice, for example, the curious negative syntax in the observation "Other sorts of Poetry almost have we none, but that lyrical kind of songs and sonnets," a peculiar prologue to a sentence that goes on to defend spiritual uses of "that lyrical kind"). Equally telling is how Sidney defends lyric from the charge of "effeminate wantonness" (p. 129) in the *Apology*: he argues that this accusation could not be relevant to a society in which women were shared—without suggesting that lyric would necessarily be innocent of it under other circumstances. Similarly, *Astrophil and Stella* repeatedly dwells on the fear that the languages of love are deceptive and destructive. Sidney frames that question in terms of interest to

---

29On the interpretive problems posed by this poem, see James Finn Cotter, "The Songs in *Astrophil and Stella*," *SP*, 67 (1970), 186–190; and Roche, "*Astrophil and Stella*," pp. 207–208.

30See, e.g., Quilligan, "Sidney and His Queen."

contemporary pragmatists, for, as we have already seen, one measure of the deceptiveness of language is that even the act of identifying and attacking its strategies may be implicated in those strategies—"while with a feeling skill I paint my hell" (2.14). This propensity of language is yet another reason why reading Sidney's admissions of failure and doubt as a game does not establish him as its victor.

Sidney's mode of anti-Petrarchism seeks to mediate conflicts about success and failure, dependence and independence, power and powerlessness, and in addition it addresses his concerns about the deceptiveness of art. It is no accident that our two touchstones, Sonnets 1 and 2, are followed sequentially by the first of Sidney's anti-Petrarchan sonnets, for that pattern enacts structurally the intimate relationship between the problematics introduced in those first two texts and the counterdiscourses of Petrarism.

As many readers have uneasily recognized, Astrophil's Petrarism is seemingly not free of the faults chronicled in his anti-Petrarchan poems: he appears to commit the very errors he condemns, raiding Petrarism in more sense than one of the verb. Denying this problem, certain scholars have asserted that Astrophil attacks only the abuses of Petrarism, which he himself avoids, not the uses of the tradition that his own work exemplifies. Others have argued instead that the anti-Petrarchism is merely another of Sidney's ploys, a ruse that creates a useful impression of forthrightness and trustworthiness. But the best analysis of this issue, like so many others raised by Sidney's poetry, is David Kalstone's assertion that Astrophil's comments on style represent "a series of rather troubled and self-conscious gestures" rather than systematic suggestions for reform. "His straining after sincerity," Kalstone continues, "suggests an uncertainty about the inherited vocabulary of love poetry." My analysis, building on yet rebuilding that perception, attempts to redefine the etiology of Sidney's uncertainty about love and several other issues.

Samples from Sonnets 15 and 55 provide the clearest introduction to these and other questions about Sidney's anti-Petrarchism.

You that do search for everie purling spring,
Which from the ribs of old Pamassus flowes,
And everie floure, not sweet perhaps, which growes
Neare therabout, into your Poesie wring.

34Kalstone, Sidney's Poetry, p. 130.
You that do Dictionarie's methode bring
Into your rime's, running in ratling rowes,
You that poore Petrarch's long deceased woes,
With new-born sighes and denisend wit do sing;
You take wrong waies, those far-fet helpes be such,
As do bewray a want of inward tuch.

(15.1-10)

It is telling that this poem attacks not only Petrarchists but also other literary practitioners, such as addicts of alliteration: just as Sidney's doubts about Petrarchism are intertwined with broader aesthetic concerns, so he deploys the counterdiscourses of Petrarchism to attempt to resolve a number of literary problems only tangentially connected to the sonnet tradition. The same scope is manifest in his references to "far-fet helpes" (9) and "denisend wit" (8), which implicitly ally his literary program with nationalism. In fact, although William A. Ringler Jr. persuasively interprets "inward tuch" (10) as "natural capacity," securely the sixteenth-century denotation of "inward" as "pertaining to the country or place itself; domestic" is relevant as well.36

Structured around the then/now opposition that we have traced in so many other Petrarchan poems, Sonnet 55 contrasts the way its speaker used to love with how he does so now:

Muses, I oft invoked your holy ayde,
With choisest flowers my speech to engarland so;

But now I meane no more your helpe to trie,
Nor other sugring of my speech to prove,
But on her name incessantly to crie.

(1-2, 9-11)

Here, as in Sonnet 15, Sidney raises broader literary issues of which conventional Petrarchism is but one manifestation. In this poem, however, Sidney transforms the spatial contrasts of Sonnet 15 into temporal dichotomies. Fashioning yet another version of narrative displacement, he declares that once he loved the wrong way, but now, inspired by Stella, he has seen the light.

Both texts, then, direct our attention to the metonymic thrust of Sidney's counterdiscourse. He repeatedly deflects concerns about his art onto the

35Ringler, Poems of Sir Philip Sidney, p. 466.
36OED, s.v. "inward."
practices of other poets or onto his literary past, and he variously displaces faults in English poesy in general onto foreign practices or Petrarchism in particular. Such patterns of deflection are evident when Sidney focuses on stylistic issues, which he does most notably in Sonnets 3, 6, and 15. Like many other anti-Petrarchan lyrics, these texts attack the practices of rehashing tired conventions and phrases and borrowing foreign traditions. In so doing, as we have already seen, Sidney alludes not only to the faults of Petrarchism but also to flaws in several other styles and genres, so that Sonnet 6, for example, refers explicitly to the “shepherd’s pipe” (7). In one sense Petrarchism interests him less than it interests other sonneteers because in another sense it interests him more: that is, it synecdochically represents faults manifest in those other modes of writing too.

When these poems are read in relationship to the anxieties about art expressed in their author’s *Apology for Poetry*, however, it is clear that he is narrowing his lens as well as widening it. For the poet who elsewhere expresses broader concerns about the corruptions of language and its practitioners, who fears that our infected will makes us prone to misuse the very faculty that distinguishes us from the beasts, here implies that only certain schools and styles are at fault. Criticizing Petrarchism and selected other stylistic modes allows him to localize the dangers he apprehends, to contain the contagion, thus implying that other forms of language, whether they be the honest speech of native poets or the way he now writes in contrast to the way he once did, are uncontaminated by those dangers. Similarly, it is no accident that reliance on other writers is, as the phrase “*Pindare’s Apes*” (3.3) reminds us, one of his most frequent charges: the fear of dependence that runs throughout his canon is, as we saw when examining Sonnet 15, deflected onto the imitative verse of other poets. And once again the problematic of dependence may conceal and reveal the perils of gender: might not his fear of the excesses of his own sexuality partly explain his condemnation of the rhetorical excesses of those poets?

---


38 Many critics have observed Sidney’s preoccupation with the dangers of art; see, e.g., Ronald Levao, “Sidney’s Feigned Apology,” *PMLA*, 94 (1979), 223–233.

39 Compare Levao and Jacqueline Miller, “‘What May Words Say’: The Limits of Language in *Astrophil and Stella*,” in *Sidney and the Interpretation of Renaissance Culture*, ed. Waller and Moore.

40 On the possibility that Sidney alludes to Pindar’s Second Pythian Ode, see E. J. DeVereux, “A Possible Source for ‘Pindare’s Apes’ in Sonnet 3 of *Astrophil and Stella*,” *NQ*, 24 (1977), 521.
We have, after all, already observed that he repeatedly connects modes of writing with modes of desiring.  

Sidney’s anti-Petrarchan poems, then, mediate his preoccupations with social behavior as well as his concerns about literary style. In some of his sonnets he works out his ambivalences about authority and dependence through the figure of Cupid, variously dramatizing Venus’s son as a helpless or rebellious child and at times addressing that mythological character from a position of knowing authority that he himself assumes. Lady Mary Wroth was to deploy Cupid very differently in her own struggles with autonomy.

Anti-Petrarchism permits a related solution to Sidney’s concerns about dependence.Attributing to sonneteers an unseemly reliance on the work of others, he implies that they, like Cupid, are submissive children, displacing his own putative loss of autonomy onto them. In so doing he has it both ways, implicitly assuming multiple roles. Like Pyrocles and Musidorus, the poet who opens his sequence by characterizing himself as “sunne-burn’d” (1.8) reacts against the paternal authority of Petrarch and Pindar. And yet, like Euarchus, at the same time he establishes himself as an authority, indeed as a judge: it is he who will establish the faults in bad poesy and lead the way to its alternative. And it is he who is a success, not least because of his ability to uncover the failures of other poets.

In uncovering those failures, however, he complicates the displacement we are analyzing—and compromises some common modes of anatomizing the anxiety of influence. “Pindare’s Apes” (3.3) may well refer to Ronsard, whom Sidney is likely to have seen as a member of an older generation; but many other attacks in Astrophil and Stella are directed to poets who, rather than being paternal figures, are in or close to Sidney’s own age cohort. Such passages warn us to interpret allusions to poetic competition, whether in Sidney’s poems or in those of other writers, with great care: as I have suggested, the power of ostensibly rejected Freudian models is manifest in many critics’ tendency to assume that rivalries among brothers merely disguise the primary Oedipal conflicts, but for many writers they may be equally powerful in their own right, especially given the repercussions of the mortality crises which I discussed in Chapter 1.

Despite—or because of—Sidney’s strategies for addressing both inter- and intragenerational tensions, some of the aesthetic problems behind the sequence are not completely resolved. In particular, he remains ambivalent about both ornate rhetoric and one of its chief exemplars, the Petrarchan

---

tradition itself. The contradictions between his aesthetic pronouncements and his own practices should not be explained away with the claim that he is merely rebuking those who misuse rhetoric. Sonnets 3, 6, and 15 do not clearly distinguish its uses from its abuses. The best analyses of his style, notably the studies by Kalstone and Rudenstine, replace the notion that Sidney gradually abandoned a courtly, highly ornamented mode of writing for a simpler one with the recognition that throughout his short career he was attracted to and skilled in many different modes of writing. Nor was he entirely comfortable with the apparent alternative to ornateness, that is, simple, straightforward language. Like Shakespeare, he at times violates his own allegiance to it. And it is telling that he parodies such rhetoric in Sonnet 74, showing that it readily descends to the wooden and naïve.

Sidney, then, is conscious that all levels of style are liable to abuse, and he certainly does not consider simple diction a ready alternative to the tricks of "Pindar's Apes" (3.3) and other members of their menagerie.

If he cannot completely resolve these problems, however, he does effect a strategy for sidestepping them. While declaring that Stella is the answer to all aesthetic dilemmas allows Sidney economically to dovetail courtly compliment and literary critique, it also permits him to finesse the dilemma of offering a more precise alternative to the literary faults he criticizes. Claiming that writing about Stella will solve one's aesthetic problems is an urbane and clever solution for a poet intensely aware of how intractable some of those problems really are. He responds, in short, to the aesthetic and other confusions that Kalstone diagnoses in part by deflecting those confusions onto other poets and in part by localizing their solution in Stella herself.

But if Stella is part of the solution to the faults of Petrarchism, she is also, of course, part of the challenge to those faults; if she is constructed as the decisive rejoinder to those who condemn that discourse, she repeatedly condemns it herself. Just as Sidney's internal conflicts about a range of aesthetic and social issues are deflected onto dramatic encounters between Astrophil and court wits or Astrophil and other poets, so they are projected onto the interplay between Stella and Astrophil. Her voice in the sequence,

---

43Kalstone, Sidney's Poetry, esp. chap. 5; and Rudenstine, Sidney's Poetic Development.
like that of Petrarch's Laura, assumes multiple and contradictory roles but is often positioned as the counterdiscourse that criticizes not only Astrophil in particular but also Petrarchism in general. In so doing, it provides one of the clearest examples in the English Petrarchan tradition of the workings of female speech—and of the dangers of reducing that complex phenomenon to broad generalizations about silencing.

Not only does Stella speak, but the power and significance of her speech are also emphasized at several points in the sequence. In Sonnet 77, for example, Sidney apportions one characteristic of Stella to each of the first seven lines—but devotes the next six lines to her speech and its consequences, celebrating the “high comforts” (10) of her conversation. Sonnet 62 stresses her exhortations to virtue. In the Eighth Song her words silence his.

Stella's words, like those of Laura and some of the Echo figures examined in Chapter 3, assume multiple and contradictory functions. These contradictions are further destabilized because Sidney cannot produce narrative displacement as Petrarch does: he cannot, that is, sort out conflicting perspectives on his lady’s speech and assign them respectively to “in vita” and “in morte” sonnets. Stella's language is indubitably associated with the erotic; both words and kisses can issue from her “swelling lip” (1), Sonnet 80 reminds us. Yet the same text contains the phrase “wisedome's beautifier” (6), thus once again creating a connection between the aesthetic and moral functions of female speech. With all due respect to some common generalizations about objectification, “beautifier” does not necessarily diminish “wisedome” or demean the speech in question. As I have argued, sixteenth-century readers would surely have recognized that aesthetic beauty can be a source and even a condition for rhetorical power; delighting and instructing are, of course, closely connected achievements, according to Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (99–100, 333–346) and many other texts of classical rhetoric as well. The relationship between wisdom and beauty is more ambiguous in another tribute to Stella's language, however: “Stella, whose voice when it speaks, / Senses all asunder breaks” (Eighth Song, 37–38). Although the primary meaning of the words is that her voice is powerful and beautiful enough to overwhelm the listener, a hint that its force destroys “sense” as well as “senses” clings to the lines.

Yet the power of Stella's voice is frequently limited, thus reminding us that in certain cases the conventional wisdom on the silencing of women...
needs to be refined, not rejected. One aim of that voice is to criticize Petrarchism; like that of Spenser’s lady, which it resembles in many ways, it often functions as the kind of counterdiscourse which offers an ethical and spiritual alternative to the yearnings of Petrarchism. Stella can teach and delight as she propounds her counterdiscourse; she cannot, however, move Astrophil to abandon love for higher pursuits. In that regard her voice is as impotent as Astrophil’s own; neither of them realizes their respective contradictory goals of moral education and seduction. Similarly, in the Third Song, for example, she is compared to Orpheus, a mythological role the Petrarchan lover often assumes; in the Fourth Song she is enchained in repetitiveness, a rhetorical pattern that often entraps the Petrarchan lover.

The Fourth and Eighth Songs body forth these and other characteristics of Stella’s voice particularly dramatically. Although some readers have claimed that in the first of those poems Stella’s final “No, no, no, no, my Deare, let be” signals her yielding to him, it is hard to believe that in a sequence as carefully written as this one, other signs of that event would not be manifest in some form, however coded, in adjoining poems. When that interpretation is abandoned, it becomes clear that the poem plays the power—and the impotence—of the two voices against each other and in so doing demonstrates, as Petrarchism and its counterdiscourses so often do, the variety of forms that power may assume. Her repetitiveness at once signals the limitations of her speech (a new avatar of Echo, she is condemned to rehearse her own words) and also its unyielding firmness. It signals, too, further parallels and elisions between the male and female figures in the sequence: repetition is, we have noted, the primary symptom of the pathologies of Petrarchism. Astrophil himself expresses but does not achieve the aim often ascribed to Petrarchan poets, mastering the lady and her body: “Write, but first let me endite” (40), with a witty and disturbing suggestion that her body will be his parchment, is his unrealized plea. It is telling, too, that even while arguing for the chronological primacy of his own writing, he figures her as a type of writer, though of letters rather than sonnets; the relationship of their voices is contestatory, as that of Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism so often is.

In the Eighth Song, the use of the definite article and of third-person

47 For a different but compatible analysis of how Spenser’s lady opposes his Petrarchan statements, see William J. Kennedy, Authorizing Petrarch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), chap. 5.
plural pronouns once again links those voices and renders them temporarily indistinguishable:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Their eares hungry of each word,} \\
\text{Which the deere tongue would afford,} \\
\text{But when their tongues could not speake,} \\
\text{Love it selfe did silence breake.}
\end{align*}
\]

(21–22, 25–26; emphasis added)

In the speech by Astrophil which follows, his claim to be speechless may indeed be a feint, especially since he follows it almost immediately with the familiar ploys of a persuasion poem. In response to those maneuvers, however, Stella delivers a moral counterdiscourse that silences not only the song but also the pretense on which it is grounded of separating Astrophil and Philip:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Therewithall away she went,} \\
\text{Leaving him so passion rent,} \\
\text{With what she had done and spoken,} \\
\text{That therewith my song is broken.}
\end{align*}
\]

(101–104)

The fact that Astrophil is not permanently silenced warns us against overestimating the power of Stella’s words; the fact that throughout the sequence he is periodically troubled by the doubts Stella’s words express and permanently unable to overcome their objections warns us against underestimating their power.

Stella’s voice, then, encapsulates many patterns that recur in the counterdiscourses of Petrarchism in general and one manifestation of those counterdiscourses, the female voice, in particular. Contradictory cultural attitudes towards female speech are suggested by the contradictory realizations of it in the sonnet tradition; one is once again reminded that silence is only one of several conflicting norms for woman’s speech in sixteenth-century England. Sidney’s sequence also reminds us of the varied forms of power to which speech may aspire: Stella’s words delight and instruct Astrophil, Astrophil’s words delight the reader whether or not they do the same for Stella, but neither character can move the other to adopt her or his perspective on love. Thus Stella’s words both participate in unresolved gendered tensions and externalize tensions within Astrophil and Sidney about literary and social practices.
The sequence can also direct our attention to two problems in our own critical practices: our approaches to aesthetic issues and to social status in sixteenth-century England. *Astrophil and Stella* demonstrates the dangers of either analyzing Sidney's style at the expense of studying his position at court, as an earlier generation of critics was prone to do, or, alternatively, reversing those priorities as contemporary critics typically do. Those arenas, the aesthetic and the politic, are entwined in the workings of his anti-Petrarchism and should be entwined in our analyses.

Sidney, master of masking that he was, delights in jumping between roles, and frequently, as we saw when reading Sonnet 1, they are roles with very different degrees of social status. These predilections, like many of the other characteristics of *Astrophil and Stella*, at once encourage biographical analysis and draw attention to its potential dangers. In particular, in assessing Sidney's social standing, an issue of considerable concern in the contemporary literary climate, scholars sometimes err both in focusing only on his position at court and in oversimplifying even that issue. Concerned to demonstrate his inferior standing in a class system within which his father was merely a knight and to chronicle his tensions with the earl of Oxford and the queen, they neglect how multifarious and varied social rankings were at the end of the sixteenth century. Sidney’s status was low enough to make him liable to insults from Oxford. And yet a poem composed after his death attributes to him the sentiment that he might have had a queen as an aunt, a claim that could in fact be variously justified by noting that the earl of Leicester might have married either Elizabeth or Mary Queen of Scots, that his uncle the earl of Huntingdon was considered in some quarters to have a claim to be monarch, and that Lady Jane Grey was, however briefly and tragically, queen. Furthermore, the court was not the only arena in which social status was determined: one must consider as well the distinction enjoyed by the Sidney family in Kent. To neglect the provinces by focusing only on the court is itself a form of provinciality.

Neither did class rankings necessarily coincide with political power, an alternative source of status. Thus if his father’s title was a recent and relatively insignificant one, he nonetheless enjoyed considerable power as a civil servant, another version of rank which was manifest in his elaborate

---


50 On that claim, see Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet*, pp. 5–15. Her entire book provides valuable biographical information that subverts the common oversimplifications of Sidney's social status.
and costly funeral. Sidney's propensity for variously constructing himself as
truant schoolboy, laboring expectant mother, authoritative literary critic,
and so on no doubt has many sources, but one may well be his awareness
of how many different rankings he could lay claim to in his culture. His
critics, too, need to be aware that its status systems were as plural and
contested as were Sidney's responses to Petrarchism.

Sidney, then, deploys the counterdiscourses of Petrarchism to address
not merely the aesthetic issues raised by Petrarchan poetry but also the
concerns about success and failure and dependence and autonomy which are
*germane* to both that mode of writing about love and the social prac­
tices of his day. His responses to these problems, as we have seen, repeatedly
involve establishing an unresolved and complex dialogue between Stella
and Astrophil. They involve, too, distinguishing himself from other figures
much as he first does in Sonnet 1 and thus addressing a range of questions
about *art* in the most specific sense as well as the arts of social behavior.
Divisive, derisory, and above all diacritical, Sir Philip Sidney's allusions to
other Petrarchan sonneteers variously reveal and conceal the central agendas
of *Astrophil and Stella*.

II

Shakespeare criticism has long been recognized as a touchstone to shifts
in our critical discourses. Witness the popularity that *The Taming of the
Shrew* and *Henry V*, texts that demand and reward feminist and new his­
toricist inquiry respectively, have achieved in recent decades. Consider,
too, the denigration in many quarters of three methodologies that were
once staples of Shakespeare scholarship: genre studies, literary history, and
formalist analyses. Instances of those three earlier methods risk at worst
being condemned as irrelevant and outdated. And at best the first two
methods court the label *solid*, a term that itself embodies telling shifts in
our critical registers, for in the United States (though not, interestingly, in
England or Canada) *solid* is currently prone to be translated as "dull." But
Shakespeare's sonnets, engaged as they are in challenging binary divisions
between fair and foul, male and female, and so on, also challenge the binary
divide between traditional and contemporary criticism. For these poems
(and, as I have argued elsewhere, many other texts as well)^{51} invite us to
adduce traditional critical approaches, notably the questions about genre

and literary history involved in studying the sonnet tradition, to elucidate the most contemporary critical issues about gender and power.

The influence of Petrarch and Petrarchism on these lyrics has not, of course, been ignored. Thomas P. Roche Jr., for example, argues that Shakespeare shares with Petrarch an acute awareness of the dangers of human love.52 In Joel Fineman's judgment the sequence is shaped by its re-interpretation of an exhausted tradition of praise, notably Petrarchan praise.53 Despite these and other commentaries, however, many critics (including myself in earlier studies) are still prone to stress what is unique about this sequence at the expense of fully analyzing its Petrarchan elements.54 Or, alternatively, readers stress its distinctive qualities by alloying Shakespeare with one or two other poets and then contrasting the resulting pair or group with more typical sonneteers.55

Admittedly, the texts offer some support for such readings; in the complexity of the relationship between the poet and the Friend, for example, these poems are certainly unusual. But interpretations that stress what is atypical about them at the expense of fully acknowledging their intimate relationship to Petrarchan norms also again manifest the dangers of circular reasoning: oversimplifying both Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism through

53Joel Fineman, Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); developed throughout the book, this argument is encapsulated on pp. 1-2. John D. Bernard argues that Shakespeare, though drawing on certain Petrarchan elements, rejects conventional Petrarchism and transforms its assumptions to produce a sacramental vision of the poetry of praise ("'To Constance Confin'de': The Poetics of Shakespeare's Sonnets," PMLA, 94 [1979], 77-90). On other parallels between Shakespeare and Petrarch, see, e.g., J. B. Leishman, Themes and Variations in Shakespeare's Sonnets, 2d ed. (London: Hutchinson, 1963), pp. 44-57. Shakespeare's adoption of the Petrarchan octet-sestet division has often been noted (see, e.g., Philip C. McGuire, "Shakespeare's Non-Shakespearian Sonnets," SQ, 38 [1987], 306).
54See, e.g., Sandra L. Bermann, The Sonnet over Time: A Study in the Sonnets of Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Baudelaire (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), esp. pp. 61-63, 73-77; and J. W. Lever, The Elizabethan Love Sonnet, 2d ed. (London: Methuen, 1966), esp. pp. 165-168. The theses of Fineman's Shakespeare's Perjured Eye are rooted in the differences between the sequence in question and others. In Shakespeare's Sonnets: Self, Love, and Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 83-84, J. M. Martin maintains that Shakespeare is often "heedless" (p. 83) of Petrarchism but nonetheless writes poems that both participate in it and criticize it. As even this brief sample may indicate, the distinctiveness of Shakespeare's sequence is often emphasized, but the resulting arguments vary in their focus and persuasiveness.
our choice of representative examples clearly encourages us to dismiss the range of poems that do not fit our definitions as sports. Behind the drive to read Shakespeare's sonnets as sui generis rather than relating them more closely to Petrarchism may also lie the bardolatry that several studies have chronicled. And might not critics' anxiety about one possible contrast between this sequence and others, the difference whose name many scholars still dare not speak, be deflected into a concern about other distinctions?

In any event, these sonnets are deeply engaged with their primary tradition and source: they are at once intensely Petrarchan and insistently anti-Petrarchan. If, as Stephen Booth observes, "the most important thing about a sonnet is that it is a sonnet," certainly one of the most important things about Shakespeare's contributions to that genre is that they are variously and on occasion simultaneously Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan sonnets. It is precisely by writing about, within, and against Petrarchism that Shakespeare writes about so much else as well. And it is precisely by raising questions about source, genre, and linguistic nuances that we can understand many of the questions that Shakespeare himself raises about the construction of gender, the gendering of empowerment, and the empowering—and disempowering—of language.

Answering these and many other questions, however, depends on arriving at a sound position on three of the critical conundrums the sonnets involve. The shifts in critical practice to which I referred earlier are also manifest in discussions of the first of these problems: the nature of the relationship between the poet and the Friend. Assurances that it exemplifies asexual friendship have been challenged by studies that assume homoeorbiticism, most notably Bruce R. Smith's judicious Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England. Such analyses have provided a valuable corrective; there is no question but that the relationship to the young man has an intensity that undermines bland generalizations about the workings of Renaissance friendship. But students of early modern literature currently risk allowing

56For example, Michael D. Bristol, Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1990); and Leah S. Marcus, Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).


58Compare Rosalie L. Colie's emphasis on the process by which each Renaissance writer "newly [creates] out of and against his tradition" (Shakespeare's Living Art [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974], p. 5).

the pendulum to swing too far: if the assertion that these poems are indisputably heterosexual is too dogmatic (as defensive observations so often are), so too is the assertion that they are unquestionably the product of a homoerotic relationship. After all, Sonnet 20 both hints at and denies homoeroticism, and urging one’s beloved to produce children with someone else is at the least unusual behavior. Donne provides the best gloss on the relevant passages in this text and elsewhere in the sequence: “Doubt wisely.” That stance need not, however, preclude hypotheses rooted in the possibility of a homoerotic reading. In particular, might the conventions of Petrarchism synecdochically represent for Shakespeare the norms of all socially sanctioned love, and might his ambivalences towards Petrarchism and its counterdiscourses both express and repress his ambivalences about those norms?

In any event, not the least reason a critic cannot with certainty adjudicate the homoerotic interpretations that have been proposed for the sequence is that one cannot determine the addressee of many of the poems. The division of these texts into two groups is the second critical conundrum that complicates our interpretations of not only their sexual orientation but their ethical, psychological, and literary orientations too. Most critics simply assume that, with the exception of Sonnets 40 through 42, the first 126 poems refer to the male Friend, whereas the subsequent texts describe the Dark Lady. To be sure, that conventional wisdom has occasionally been challenged. Hilton Landry, for example, briefly calls into question the model of two groups, though he proceeds to accept it implicitly. But the power of the more customary readings of the sonnets is manifest in the fact that trenchant arguments like his have had so little influence.

I am not maintaining that the claim that Shakespeare’s poems fall into two distinct groups with different addressees is definitely fallacious. It is, however, grounded on shaky evidence. After all, as Margreta de Grazia

---

60See esp. the notes on this poem in Booth, Shakespeare’s Sonnets, pp. 163–165.
61I thank Michael Stapleton for useful comments on this and other issues.
63For a more detailed exposition of this argument, cf. the paper I delivered at the 1992 Shakespeare Association of America conference, "’Incertainties now crown themselves assured’: The Politics of Plotting Shakespeare’s Sonnets," Kansas City, Mo.
notes, the addressee of many of the sonnets is not explicitly gendered.\textsuperscript{65} Moreover, the stanzaic irregularities of Sonnet 126 do not irrefutably mark it as a turning point, as many critics have asserted; Sonnet 99 has what might be described as a similar irregularity—fifteen lines—and in a sequence that includes a repeated couplet and several pairs in which one may well be a draft of the second, it is risky to assign thematic significance to the fact that Sonnet 126 is incomplete. Similarly, Katherine Duncan-Jones's claim that the 1609 edition was not pirated and that the sequence enjoys an integrity and structural unity is compromised by the sonnets that are evidently imperfect and the sets that seem to be versions of the same lyric.\textsuperscript{66}

Above all, the assertion that the first 126 poems consistently apply to the Friend and the next group to the Dark Lady is a classic illustration of circular reasoning: one chooses a few poems to establish the truism that the Friend is generally fair and the Dark Lady incessantly evil and then deploys that assumption to gender the addressee of other sonnets.

If, then, we acknowledge that we do not definitively know the direction of address of many sonnets, we need at least to entertain the possibility that not only Sonnets 40 to 42 but also a number of the others in the first 126 poems describe the Dark Lady. And perhaps a few of the subsequent lyrics refer not to her but to the Friend. This supposition of course complicates many conventional interpretations of the sequence and generates a range of alternatives. For example, if some poems, such as Sonnet 128, that are usually read in reference to the Dark Lady are addressed to the Friend, the sequence might be more overtly homoerotic than we usually believe. And if one destabilizes the direction of address of many poems, one cannot assume that the sonnets to the Friend typically represent an idealized Petrarchism and those addressed to the Dark Lady a virulent anti-Petrarchism.

That recognition gestures towards our third conundrum: the recurrent difficulty of defining what Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism are in this sequence. Many of its elements comfortably fit into one or the other of those categories. But in some instances the line between them, like so many other boundaries, blurs. Thus, as Fineman among others has shown, in certain respects the Dark Lady is the prototypical Petrarchan mistress, and yet in other respects so too is the Friend.\textsuperscript{67} And the problem of determining


\textsuperscript{66}Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Was the 1609 \textit{Shakespeare's Sonnets} Really Unauthorized?" \textit{RES}, 34 (1983), 151–171.

whether allusions to blackness are Petrarchan or anti-Petrarchan is clearly posed by poems such as Sonnet 127.

The sequence is certainly loaded with more Petrarchan motifs and conventions than readers preoccupied with its unique qualities have acknowledged. Shakespeare refers repeatedly to immortalization and the dangers of praise; poems such as Sonnet 98 emphasize absence; Sonnet 43 among others describes seeing the beloved in a dream; Sonnet 66 offers social satire; and Sonnet 86 credits the beloved with inspiring the poet's verse. For all the originality and idiosyncrasy of Sonnet 94, its famous observation that the figures it anatomizes "are themselves as stone" (3)70 recalls Dante's *rime petrose* and their lineal descendants, the many sonnets by Petrarch which describe the lady or her poet as stonelike. Other Petrarchan tropes pepper the sequence too—love is compared to a ship, to tyranny and idolatry, and so forth." Sonnet 104 echoes Petrarch's signature poems, the anniversary lyrics (though with a telling shift in emphasis, Shakespeare's intensified focus on the passage of time rather than the originary moment or the possibility of recalling that moment). Recognizing these overt Petrarchan elements prepares us to acknowledge that although the procreation sonnets differ from conventional Petrarchism, if taken out of context some of them would read like wholly standard carpe diem poems within that tradition. Consider, for example, Sonnet 4:

```
Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend
Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?
Nature's bequest gives nothing but doth lend,
And being frank she lends to those are free.

Thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee,
Which used lives th' executor to be.
```

(1-4, 13-14)

Above all, however, Shakespeare's sonnets are Petrarchan in a more subtle way: their speaker's subjectivity is shaped and often misshaped by precisely the issues about agency and authority which we traced in Chapter 2. Although his skids between asserting the immortalizing power of his own verse and denying that power may well manifest his ambivalence

---


*All citations from the sonnets are to Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

*On Shakespeare's references to tyranny and slavery, see the useful comments in Ferry, "Inward" Language, pp. 207-208.*
about the object of praise, as Anne Ferry persuasively demonstrates, in addition they show his uncertainty over his own agency. Notice the characteristic grammatical structure that at once celebrates that agency and undercuts it: “O none, unless this miracle have might / That in black ink my love may still shine bright” (65.13–14). Indeed, throughout these lyrics he repeatedly draws attention to his own inadequacies.

In a sequence that obsessively returns to binary contrasts and equally obsessively undercuts them, those inadequacies are frequently played against the potency of the Friend and the Dark Lady. “They that have pow’r to hurt, and will do none” (94.1; emphasis added) is the revealing opening of one of the most famous—and most notorious—sonnets in the sequence. The fact that neither the Friend nor the Dark Lady speaks does not testify to limitations in their power; indeed, the negatives in the subsequent lines of Sonnet 94, which describe behavior that is in a sense the physical equivalent of speechlessness, associate that behavior with a kind of power:

That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who moving others are themselves as stone,
Unmov’d, cold, and to temptation slow.
(2–4)

Similarly, the characters in Shakespeare’s plays sometimes assert their power by refusing to act when others expect them to—witness Coriolanus and his wounds.

One of the primary arenas for the speaker’s battles between power and its absence is, however, in a sense formal. Here, as in other sequences, those struggles are waged in terms of the conflict between narrative and lyric. Yet once again narrative does not represent the speaker’s achieved and assured male power, as the conventional gendering of narrativity or its role in Astophil and Stella might lead us to expect. At times it represents instead a threat to his relationship with the beloved, as in many of Petrarch’s poems, whereas elsewhere it is a source and symbol of the power for which he strives, often in vain.

The tension between narrative and antinarrative elements which characterizes Petrarchism in general occurs in intensified and heightened form.


in Shakespeare's lyrics in part because both the drive to narrate and the fear of that drive or incapacity to fulfill it are more intense than in most other sequences. The desire to immortalize by praising the beloved as well as by telling stories (including stories about immortalization) impels narrativity in these texts, and the concern to trace the effects of time generates an attraction to narrative, the mode rooted in temporality.\(^3\) On the other hand, these sonnets also variously manifest a fear and a rejection of storytelling. Here, as in Petrarch, that activity is often associated with the threatening passage of time. Thus Sonnet 73, a meditation on temporality, is in a sense itself suspended in an imperiled lyric instant.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold,
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou seest the twilight of such day,
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As on the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

(1-12)

The text focuses not on process but on the moment before it and the fearful anticipation of it: "whereon it must expire" (11; emphasis added). Or, to put it another way, it presents the fear of narrativity in the sense of temporal change by rooting itself in beleaguered lyric stasis. Notice that even line two ("yellow leaves, or none, or few") displaces yet draws attention to the diachronic by transforming it into a series of synchronic alternatives. Here narrativity is in a sense the enemy at the gates. In other sonnets, however, narrativity threatens the speaker of these poems in a very different way: if narrative is, as Barthes among many others has claimed, the product of the drive to know, Shakespeare's sonnets demonstrate the fear of that drive ("Suspect I may, yet not directly tell" [144.10]).

More to our purposes, Shakespeare also sometimes eschews narrative because of a lack, real or perceived, of the authority and control involved in shaping stories; if one is directed, even constructed, by the will of others,

\(^3\)Many critics have analyzed the treatment of time in these poems. See esp. Ferry, All in War with Time, chap. 1.
if it is hard or even impossible to assume control over the story of one's own life, other types of narrative may be rendered problematical as well. (Compare Ariel, whose powerlessness is manifest not in the inability to tell stories but in the imperative to repeat tales dictated by others: "Where was she born? / Speak. Tell me" [Tempest, I.ii.259–260].) Storytelling is further complicated, though not necessarily precluded, in this sequence by its approach to human agency. For yet another way the poems avoid making definitive statements about the action they concern is by deflecting or even denying its source. For example, Sonnet 87 laments "So thy great gift, upon misprision growing, / Comes home again, on better judgement making" (11–12), thus deflecting agency to the gift and obscuring the action of the person who calls it home and makes the seemingly better judgment.

Hence it is not surprising that these poems generally avoid many of the types of narrativity that figure so prominently in certain other sequences—descriptions of events that befall the lovers like Astrophil and Stella 41, allegorical tales like Amoretti 75, detailed rehearsals of the first sight of the beloved. But rather than eschewing narrative completely, as I argued in a previous study, Shakespeare's sonnets respond to an ambivalence about narrativity by delimiting it and displacing it in three arenas: syntactical formulas such as when/then, Anacreontic stories, and accounts of the future. Like the displacement and condensation involved in dreamwork, which they resemble in many ways, these strategies typically try to control the anxieties associated with storytelling. And, like that displacement, the three techniques are at best only partly successful in their attempt to restore agency to the speaker and narrative order to his sequence. In short, these poems repeatedly problematize the narrative impulse that the conventional wisdom so unproblematically assigns to them.

The third mode, narratives of the future, is most germane here because of both its connection with the modalities of the Canzoniere and its relevance to the poet's subjectivity. Many students of narrative devote little or no attention to this category—Tzvetan Todorov, for example, has an entire chapter on primitive narratives, of which only two and one-half pages concern what he terms prophetic narratives—but the process of telling stories about the future would repay further attention. Such a project could

---

75 Dubrow, Captive Victors, pp. 171–190. See also the earlier version of this argument, "Shakespeare's Undramatic Monologues: Toward a Reading of the Sonnets," SQ, 32 (1981), 55–68 (reprinted in Shakespearean Criticism, 10 [Gale, 1990]).
fruitfully start by examining prophecy in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, where its ambivalences are bifurcated and gendered into the frenzied darkness of the Sibyl and the genealogical reassurances of Anchises, the first of whom represents agency compromised and complicated by the god within, whereas the second both embodies agency and strengthens that of his son.77

Shakespeare’s sonnets inhabit a different type of underworld, but prophecies of the future are as important here as in the *Aeneid*, raising similar issues about agency. Sometimes these texts tell a story of an ideal future, projecting onto that moment a return of the ideal, idyllic past or a fantasy of untroubled union which apparently cannot be realized in the present. Or they may deploy a monitory narrative about the future to encourage the addressee to change the plot that she or he has scripted for the present; witness the predictions in the procreation sequence, notably Sonnet 12.

Other sonnets project what has happened or may happen onto what will happen, attributing to the future a fulfillment of fears about the present. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 71 the act of commanding the addressee not to love him in the future might displace fears that he is not loved now. As this instance suggests, however, even the most disturbed and disturbing narratives about the future involve some assertion of control: announcing that one can predict treachery and betrayal, that one will not be surprised by them, suggests at least a measure of mastery.

But the most intriguing narratives about the future are those in which two narrators struggle for possession of it, thus rendering its events even more cloudy. By alluding to time’s “antique pen” in Sonnet 19 (10), Shakespeare reminds us that he and Time are plotting alternative narratives about the future. In Sonnet 7 the speaker, once again using a version of the when/then formula and thus suggesting inevitability, crafts a metaphor that indicates that the addressee, like the sun, will “[reel] from the day” (10). Yet the couplet invites that addressee to unlink tenor and vehicle, to disprove the inevitability, to write his own alternative narrative: “So thou, thyself outgoing in thy noon, / Unlooked on diest unless thou get a son.”

The so-called Rival Poet is not the only rival narrator in this sequence. And in another group of poems, which includes Sonnet 2 and several other lyrics in the procreation sequence, the speaker writes alternative narratives between which the addressee must choose, thus once again on the one hand demonstrating his power (it is he who crafts the narratives) and on the other hand signaling his powerlessness (it is the addressee who must select one of the stories and delete the other file, no matter how much the poet attempts to guide his choice). Thus narratives about the future, de-

77I am indebted to Howard Weinbrot for suggesting the relevance of the *Aeneid*. 
signed in no small part to assure the agency of their teller, may mark the threats to that agency as clearly as his difficulty with narrativity elsewhere in the sequence does.

As these instances suggest, by displacing narrativity onto the future Shakespeare struggles to achieve the types of certainty and mastery that many other sonneteers are more able than he to achieve when they tell stories in the present tense. In so doing, however, he often merely replicates the threats to that mastery which recur elsewhere in the sequence. Indeed, narrative in Shakespeare's sonnets is typically a process of struggle—struggle between rival narrators, rival endings to the same story, and rival models for sonneteering.

These analyses of one central Petrarchan element in the sonnets, the problematics of agency, suggest the relationship of these poems not only to the traditions of Petrarchism but also to the work of Petrarch specifically. Admittedly, some blatant differences distinguish the two poets. In particular, although the sequence contains political sonnets and poems addressed to Petrarch's friends, Petrarch and Laura often appear isolated both from each other and from the rest of the world. In contrast, although Peter Greenaway's extraordinary film *Prospero's Books* in many ways violates the play it purports to represent, in one relevant respect its spirit is curiously close to that of the sonnets: their isle, too, is full of noises, of the dissonant mutterings and constant movements of shadowy figures ("every alien pen" [78.3], "lest the world should task you" [72.1]) who impinge on the speaker even, or especially, when he appears to be most alone. Despite differences like this, however, the sonnets of Petrarch and Shakespeare share an obsessive fear of impending harm and a slippage between success and failure which, though far from unique to these poems, is more rapid and dramatic than its analogues in many other sequences. And the structural function of Shakespeare's couplets, which so often unsettle the very closure they seemingly establish, is strikingly similar to that of the final poem in the *Rime sparse*. Both poets establish a formal pattern that apparently builds to resolution, in the one instance the rhyme scheme of the so-called Shakespearean sonnet, and in the other a narrative culminating in a climactic union with Laura's alternative and alter ego, the Virgin Mary. And both poets proceed to undermine that resolution in ways that also undermine their power.

---

I have argued at some length for the Petrarchan elements in the sonnets because their presence helps to explain the intensity and variety of their counterdiscourses. It is precisely because Petrarchism is always a major force in this sequence and often a menacing one that these texts react against it. In his dramatic as well as his nondramatic works, Shakespeare typically sees conflict in terms of rivalry, which is one of many reasons the best of the psychoanalytic Shakespeareans have so often hit the mark. And in the case of the sonnets, not the least of the many rivalries that construct the geometry of this triangulated sequence are those among conflicting discourses: Petrarchism versus anti-Petrarchism and one version of anti-Petrarchism against another.

First, then, these poems participate in one of the most common modes of anti-Petrarchism, the stylistic critique. Like many other poets, Shakespeare assails Petrarchism for strained comparisons and unoriginal rhetoric. The simple, straightforward, and constant style that his poems represent and recommend is played against a more duplicitous language.

So is it not with me as with that muse,
Stirred by a painted beauty to his verse,
Who heav'n itself for ornament doth use,
And every fair with his fair doth rehearse—

O let me true in love but truly write.

(21.1-4, 9)

"A painted beauty" (2) may, of course, refer either to someone else's art or to a woman wearing cosmetics; the body of the text and of the mistress elide, a pattern we will encounter again in Chapter 5. Similarly, although it alludes less explicitly to Petrarchism, Sonnet 76 raises related aesthetic issues.

Why is my verse so barren of new pride,
So far from variation or quick change?
Why with the time do I not glance aside
To new-found methods, and to compounds strange?

O know, sweet love, I always write of you,
And you and love are still my argument.
So all my best is dressing old words new.

(1-4, 9-11)

79Compare Booth, Shakespeare's Sonnets, p. 166.
Here, in establishing the norm of constancy, Shakespeare is not only rejecting Petrarchism but also reinterpreting one of its characteristics in a way that makes it more acceptable: the repetitions associated with it (as well as with other literary styles, of course) become a sign of ethical probity, not literary or psychological weakness. So in the very process of condemning doubleness, Shakespeare pursues his own double agenda.

Stylistic critiques like these are the core of the anti-Petrarchism in many other sequences. Here, however, they are but one battle, and neither the most fierce nor the most interesting, in the war against Petrarchism. The principal linkages between Petrarch and Shakespeare which I have traced involve losses and failures, and so it is not surprising that many of Shakespeare's attacks on Petrarchism represent attempts to reassert the power of the speaker.

In particular, we should read the procreation sonnets as an implicit counterdiscourse among whose agendas is that reassertion. Two practitioners of gay and lesbian criticism, Joseph Pequigney and Bruce R. Smith, have found in these poems a denial of desire which is played against its admission, in more than one sense of that word, in Sonnet 20. Whether or not one accepts those readings, the procreation poems represent another form of denial. If they echo the carpe diem topos that is so common in Petrarchan and other forms of love poetry, they also establish a series of contrasts with Petrarchism. Against sexuality as blind and blinding desire, they play sexuality as the means of procreation. Against love as narcissistic drive, they play love as the opposite pole to narcissism: the fulfillment of social obligations. It is telling that Sonnet 9 repeats "the world" no fewer than five times:

```
Ah, if thou issueless shalt hap to die,
The world will wail thee like a makeless wife;
The world will be thy widow and still weep,
Look what an unthrift in the world doth spend
Shifts but his place, for still the world enjoys it;
But beauty's waste hath in the world an end.
```

(3–5, 9–11)

The world, which elsewhere is represented as gossiping tongues and disapproving eyes, here stands instead for the obligations that the young man

---

is enjoined to fulfill. And that process of enjoining suggests the most central contrast with Petrarchism: against the role of sophistic and self-serving lover is played that of apparently disinterested and detached mentor, who himself represents the very sense of responsibility which he is advocating. In a few sonnets, of course, he admits his own emotional involvement ("Make thee another self for love of me" [10.13]). But even this involvement seems less intense and more rational than the emotions found in subsequent lyrics, and in any event it does not seriously challenge the stance of objective adviser. Thus the procreation sonnets constitute a counterdiscourse in one of the most important senses that we have defined: they represent an alternative mode of love and of writing about it that is repeatedly if implicitly contrasted with Petrarchism. The speaker assumes the high ground—a high ground that in other sonnets will be buffeted by tornadoes and drowned by tidal waves.

Many though not all the sonnets usually assumed to be addressed to the Friend also seem to represent an alternative to Petrarchan love. The contrast has been variously defined by students of these poems: friendship versus love, fidelity versus deceit, and so on. Shakespeare himself appears to establish and then gloss this dichotomy when he enumerates his "two loves . . . of comfort and despair" (144.1). But, as that poem itself demonstrates, such contrasts are at once as fascinating and fragile as a mirage. Fascinating because, like other mirages, they reveal the thirsts of the poet and the critics who support them. And fragile because they dissolve when one approaches them. The Friend is graced—or ostensibly so—with some of the qualities often associated with the Petrarchan lady, such as beauty and constancy. Moreover, the reader often does not know for sure, I have argued, whether a given sonnet refers to the Friend or the Dark Lady, and so the assertion that one represents an un-Petrarchan reliability ("not acquainted / With shifting change, as is false women's fashion" [20.3–4]) is problematical. Above all, however, the contrast between the two breaks down because of the parallels between them; in particular, in both Friend and Dark Lady the relationship between show and substance, outer form and inner being, is dubious and duplicitous.

Even if one questions the division of the sonnets into two groups, it is clear that the central attacks on Petrarchism occur in the poems between 127 and 154. These texts are a virtual anthology of the many counterdiscourses of Petrarchism: they include the famous parody of Petrarchan

---

132 ECHOES OF DESIRE

---

81Compare Fineman, Shakespeare's Perjured Eye, p. 251.
82For a lengthier discussion of this group of poems, see Dubrow, Captive Victors, pp. 232–245. The current analysis, however, differs from the earlier one in a few ways, notably the suggestion that Sonnet 130 need not have been inspired by the Dark Lady.
compliment in Sonnet 130, the exaggerations of Petrarchan complaint in Sonnets 131 and 133, the moral repudiation of erotic love in poems like Sonnet 129, and the discussions of blackness that run throughout this group.

Critics generally assume that Sonnet 130 was inspired by the Dark Lady. The caveats I raised earlier (as well as the broader problems of referentiality) suggest one should question even that assumption: the poem could conceivably have originated as an exercise in anti-Petrarchism written before any encounter with a particular woman, perhaps a coda to the debates about blackness in Love's Labour's Lost. Whatever its genesis, this text cleverly rebuts many Petrarchan clichés:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun—
Coral is far more red than her lips' red—
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun—
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head:
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet by heav'n I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

The straightforward declarative syntax and the prevalence of monosyllables in the opening lines exemplify the plain-speaking that the author has elsewhere advocated and hence implicitly offer an alternative to the poems being mocked. Notice, too, how the precision of "some perfumes" (7; emphasis added) suggests the reliability of the poet. The tone of the poem, however, is not completely straightforward. Stephen Booth, hardly one to gloss over ambiguities and dissonances, categorizes it as "a winsome trifle." Fair enough, but one exception introduces more troubling issues into the text and thus foreshadows the complications that arise when this poem is read in relation to the others that surround it. Reeks primarily means "to emanate"—but its negative connotations may have been available to poet and reader in the 1590s. Therefore this lyric raises questions,

83Booth, Shakespeare's Sonnets, p. 452.
84OED, s.v. "reek," locates the first negative usage in the eighteenth century, but cf. Booth, Shakespeare's Sonnets, p. 454.
however ambiguously and briefly, about what failings in both poet and lady may lurk beneath the dappled surfaces of an apparently urbane and balanced counterdiscourse.

Those questions arise in surrounding texts as well: Sonnet 130 must also be read in the context of the other poems about black wires, black brows, and black morals, and these texts render the witty surfaces of Shakespeare's most famous lyric on blackness more suspect. Whether or not Sonnet 130 was inspired by the figure we call the Dark Lady, all these poems indubitably concern the process of celebrating blackness. The playful assertions in Sonnet 130 that black is really fair are countered by pained acknowledgments in other sonnets that it is evil, as is the process of praising it: "In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds" (131.13). Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the poems on blackness play several types of counterdiscourse against one another and in so doing raise questions about not merely Petrarchism but also the poet's challenges to it. Thus while several of the other poets who celebrate their own dark ladies mock the deceptions suffered by others, Shakespeare's texts pivot on self-deception.

In short, in attempting to find our way within what Martin Green aptly termed the labyrinth of Shakespeare's sonnets, we may be guided by some of the threads that we have followed elsewhere in this study. Once again we recognize the variety that characterizes both Petrarchism and its counterdiscourses despite all their conventions. Once again we see that the role of Petrarchan lover—or anti-Petrarchan satirist—does not guarantee power, or at least not unchallenged power. Nor does the silence of the Friend and the Dark Lady signal their powerlessness. And once again we acknowledge that the counterdiscourses of English Petrarchism cannot be defused by calling them a game: Shakespeare's sonnets enact the attempt to do so and display its sorry consequences.

III

Lady Mary Wroth's sonnets, too, are labyrinthine. Not only do they explicitly invoke the image of a labyrinth, but they mime one as well in their knotty syntax, refusal of a linear plot, evocation of psychic entrap-

---

ment, and, above all, the critical conundrums they pose for their readers. To trace the relationship between autonomy and subjection in Pamphilia to Amphilanthus is to enter a maze signposted with clear but conflicting directions from previous critics. How does one reconcile Wroth’s choice of the Sidney family arms and Sidney family genres with the independence she lays claim to as a female author? How does one connect the passivity that, as I will demonstrate shortly, distinguishes the opening of her sonnet sequence from many of its counterparts with the agency she so triumphantly asserts elsewhere in that sequence? How does one explain the connection between constancy as a sign of heroic, proud female subjectivity and constancy as a value patriarchy ascribes to women for its own ends? The final sonnet in Pamphilia to Amphilanthus raises such questions in particularly pointed form: does the sequence culminate in Pamphilia’s freedom from love and the sonnet tradition, or is her achievement of that state incomplete, much as both the folio and the manuscript continuation of the Urania break off in mid-sentence? These problems are embedded in an issue especially germane to this study: Mary Wroth’s juxtaposition of the most conventional Petrarchism with its most rebellious counterdiscourses.

Feminist criticism, especially as practiced by students of nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, proffers a number of possible models for resolving these paradoxes about freedom and its absence. Some paradigms invite us to approach Wroth’s apparent loss of freedom as a politic feint testifying to the latent or realized power of suppressed groups; others encourage us instead to interpret that loss as yet another sign of the power against which such groups struggle in vain. For example, the theory of masquerade developed in film studies by Mary Ann Doane maintains that women deliberately adopt in exaggerated form characteristics assigned to them by men, such as passivity, to reveal such traits as dubious cultural constructions. Articulated by Elaine Showalter, the concept of the double-voiced dis-

---

86On Wroth’s retention of the Sidney arms, see Margaret P. Hanna, Philip’s Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 188.
88A number of critics have commented on the ending of the Urania; Lamb, for instance, maintains that the incompleteness is deliberate (Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle, p. 148).
course situates members of a muted group in a cultural space that overlaps with but is not completely contained by the dominant culture, as we saw earlier; this model, which emphasizes that the muted must express their values within constraints, might well explain the double-voiced responses to independence in Wroth. In addition, many students of early modern England have discussed how women in Tudor and Stuart England internalize cultural images of themselves, and so one should hardly be surprised to find a considerable component of ambivalence in a woman who challenges those images. Can the subaltern subvert? Yes, according to this interpretation, but only with an ambivalence that itself subverts subversion.

The career of Lady Mary Wroth provides a good test case for these theories.

Previous critics of Wroth also offer a range of possible interpretations on the subject of her independence. Although some earlier students of her work, such as Janet MacArthur and May Nelson Paulissen, emphasize her indebtedness to generic and familial traditions and her participation in a coterie of writers, Gary Waller depicts a more conflicted struggle against various father figures. Ann Rosalind Jones attributes signs of meekness in Wroth to a politic desire to regain her position at court. Other critics emphasize the triumphant achievement of autonomy despite the pressures Waller chronicles. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, for example, argues for Wroth's independent reinterpretation of the literary traditions she inherited. The apparent contradiction to that independence, her espousal of the stereotypically feminine virtue constancy, is briefly but suggestively read as a kind of knowing camouflage (the parallel with the cinematic masquerade, though not asserted, is telling); thus Lewalski maintains that Wroth's espousal of constancy could serve to distract readers from the radical innovations of Wroth's sonnet sequence.

The seemingly conflicting approaches enumerated above all have more than a grain of truth, but they need variously to be revised and reconciled.

---


96 Lewalski, Writing Women in Jacobean England, p. 263.
before they can be properly applied to Wroth. In her stance towards male authorities of all types, literary tradition in general, and Petrarchism in particular, she, like certain Continental women writers, does indeed manifest both dependence and independence. Critics should not, in response to the very pressures that impelled some first-generation Shakespearean feminists to focus unduly on Shakespeare’s strong heroines, obscure the surrender of power which coexists so uneasily with Wroth’s assertion of it. Their amalgam, though it illuminates other women writers and women’s writing, is in an important sense idiosyncratic, or at least local: the paradoxical characteristics that I have already identified in Wroth can be traced in part to certain models that inspired her quest for autonomy. In particular, Petrarchism was both a source of and a stage for that quest; hence examining the relationship between Petrarchism and its counterdiscourses helps us to understand Wroth’s connection to those literary traditions and also her conflicting and conflicted approach to autonomy in general.

Dismayed by the early studies that dismissed Wroth’s poetry as boiler-plate Petrarchism, inspired by the feminist analyses that demonstrate the distinctive gendering of genres, many scholars have focused on the idiosyncratic characteristics of Pamphilia to Amphilanthus and especially on how they reform or deform the Petrarchan tradition, not how they embrace it. No sensible critic would advocate a return to classifying these poems as mechanical Petrarchan imitations. But neither should studying how they reinterpret that tradition preclude emphasizing their extensive debts to it: acknowledging and anatomizing the Petrarchan elements in Pamphilia to Amphilanthus allows us to understand more about the characteristics of that literary mode, the ways it negotiates gender, and its author’s travails and travels in those two neighboring labyrinths that mirror each other’s structure, Petrarchism and its counterdiscourses.

The opening sonnet in the sequence, a poem that has not received as much scrutiny as it deserves, introduces its author’s approach to both Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism.

When nights black mantle could most darknes prove,
And sleepe deaths Image did my senses hierc
From knowledg of my self, then thoughts did move
Swifter then those most swiftnes need require:

97See Jones’s argument about dialogic writing in the work of Pernette du Guillet and Tullia d’Aragona (Currency of Eros, chap. 3).
98See, e.g., MacArthur’s argument that though the poems stage a conflict between female difference and the desire to emulate Petrarchism, the latter wins, producing a sequence that subscribes to the Law of the Father (“‘A Sydney,’ “ esp. pp. 17–18).
In sleepe, a Chariot drawne by wing'd desire
I sawe: wher sate bright Venus Queene of love,
And att her feete her sonne, still adding fire
To burning heate which she did hold above,

Butt one hart flaming more then all the rest
The goddess held, and putt itt to my brest,
Deare sonne, now shutt sayd she: thus must wee winn;

Hee her obay'd, and marri'd my poore hart,
I, waking hop'd as dreames itt would depart
Yet since: O mee: a lover I have binn.99

This lyric flags its indebtedness to a whole range of literary and iconographic traditions. The murdered heart is a convention of Petrarchism, and, in addition, Mary Wroth borrows from Petrarch's Trionfi, part of which her aunt had translated. Indeed, in alluding to the Trionfi at the beginning of a sonnet sequence, Wroth plays one Petrarch against another—which is itself a characteristically Petrarchan maneuver, as the opening lyric in the Rime sparse reminds us. As Nona Fienberg has demonstrated, Wroth also invokes the Vita Nuova,100 practices emblematic writing, and deploys the dream vision. The lyric is, in short, intensely, even insistently Petrarchan, and its other debts are unabashed too.

But this sonnet also differs from many of its sources and in so doing signals the agendas of the entire sequence. Wroth transforms literary conventions in ways that direct our attention to both the power of gender and the gendering of power. The dream vision is itself a norm of Petrarchism, in which it generally permits forms of wish fulfillment, as Freud asserts dreams typically do;101 the chaste mistress may be embraced in one's dreams, the threatening satyr killed. Mary Wroth, in contrast, dreams of the origins of an unfulfilled love, of loss and pain, a deviation from other sequences which prepares us for the exceptionally melancholy tone of her sonnets. In most Petrarchan cycles, two radically different modes of consciousness,

99All citations are to Josephine A. Roberts, ed., The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).
sleep and waking, are played against each other in narratives of a dream, but here Wroth presents not change but stasis. For the speaker’s desire that “as dreams itt would depart” (13), like so many of her desires later in the sequence, is unfulfilled, another harbinger of the monochromatic tone of many of these sonnets and of their refusal to sustain the types of transformation for which the speaker strives elsewhere in the sequence, notably in the crown poems.

Above all, the emphasis on dreaming places her in a singularly passive position. If one plot of the sonnet, her encounter with Venus and Cupid, casts her as the object of actions performed by others (“and martir'd my poore hart” [12]), its overarching plot, the dream vision, intensifies that loss of agency. Her absence of agency distinguishes her from the speakers in some comparable poems. In Idea 2, Drayton deploys the conceit of the murdered heart to seek revenge against his lady; he is remarkably feisty, if not downright nasty, for a man whose heart was slain. And in Astrophil and Stella 20, Astrophil speaks with real energy when he urges his friends to fly because of his “death wound” (1). Similarly, Sidney opens his sequence on action attempted though frustrated; in the first poem of Pamphilia to Amphilanthus, in contrast, the speaker created by his niece does not even attempt to act. The poem that concludes the sequence echoes Pt in many ways, not least its emphasis on passivity [“Sleepe in the quiett of a faithfull love” (2)], though here the speaker chooses passivity rather than having it imposed on her.

Pamphilia’s loss of agency in Pt is also manifest through narrativity. Telling this story does not assure the kind of mastery narratologists sometimes associate with the act of recounting a tale: it is a story of failure like so many of Shakespeare’s, and its epistemological status as a dream further plays down the act of shaping it. Thus Wroth’s approach to narrative at the beginning of Pamphilia to Amphilanthus, like some other traits of her writing, allies her more closely with her literary forebear Shakespeare than with her blood relative Sir Philip Sidney.

Other deviations from models and sources are equally telling. Mary Wroth recasts the narrative she tells to structure it around a binary, gendered conflict. The description in the Trionfi focuses on Cupid, with Venus making a cameo appearance as one of his victims, and in the third chapter of the Vita Nuova, Love feeds Dante’s heart to his beloved, who was herself asleep until that event. Here, however, Wroth stages a scene between Venus and Cupid (her speaker, though present, does not assume an active role in this particular drama), thus introducing the predilection for pairs of characters and binary formulations which will recur throughout. More specifically, she introduces a pair including a male character into a sequence
that erases the male who appears within its title, but she does not erase possible avatars and reincarnations of him.

Indeed, the role of gender in the encounter between Venus and Cupid prepares us for its workings throughout this cycle. Given his prominence later in the sequence, it is all the more surprising and all the more telling that Cupid is here reduced to a subservient position. His literal lowliness—he sits at his mother's feet—is matched by his role as her minion: he follows her orders throughout, adding fire to a heart she holds. Thus the lyric evokes a hierarchical relationship between a male and a female character; the potential conflict between them (Venus and Cupid are at odds later in the sequence, as in so many of the Anacreontic poems that help to shape it) is averted, and the dominant adult woman controls her young son. Or, to put it another way, the female is bifurcated into two figures, the wholly passive speaker and the active and powerful goddess of love—a divide that manifests Wroth's own divided responses to female power and probably more specifically to the forms of it evident in writing sonnets. Whereas Sidney expresses his ambivalence about poesy at the beginning of *Astrophil and Stella* by variously identifying Astrophil with a child and with a woman struggling through a difficult labor, Wroth expresses many of her ambivalences by evoking two very different female figures.

In so doing, she also hints at her preference for assuming multiple roles. As Naomi J. Miller has argued, Wroth typically constructs multiple and at times contradictory subjectivities. In the poem at hand she is, of course, primarily figured as Pamphilia. But as a writer undertaking a bold generic experiment, she may well identify, or at least attempt to identify, with Venus's confident mastery as well. And as the child of Robert Sidney and niece of Philip Sidney, is she perhaps in a role of pupil which may even ally her, however tangentially, with Venus's son? Luce Irigaray among others has pointed out that subject and object often reverse places in a dream; this may be one of the many reasons that form of narrative appeals to Wroth. These speculations about her identification with all three personages are necessarily tentative, but they gain some credence from the

102 Naomi J. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Mary Wroth and the Formations of Gender in Early Modern England," chap. 2, forthcoming. I am indebted to the author for sharing this work before it was published, as well as for a number of useful suggestions about Wroth; I regret that I read her manuscript only after this chapter was substantially complete.

103 In her unpublished paper "Mary Wroth's Poetics of the Self in the Petrarchan Tradition," Nona Fienberg suggests that Wroth identifies with Venus elsewhere in the sequence. I am grateful to the author for making her article available to me.

juxtaposition of multiple roles and the elision of gender boundaries elsewhere in the sequence.

_Pamphilia to Amphilanthus_ opens, then, on many of the issues I will trace throughout this section: Wroth's skilled reinterpretation of generic traditions inherited from a range of writers besides Philip and Robert Sidney, her deflection of issues about gender from the main plot to other stories, her predilection for both creating and blurring binary formulations, and her ambivalence about her own power and authority. But these problems, the material of contemporary feminist and new historicist inquiry, are expressed not only within but also in terms of a question of interest to traditional literary historians, Mary Wroth's relationship to Petrarchism and its counterdiscourses.

_Pamphilia to Amphilanthus_ is festooned with and impelled by Petrarchan conventions. Witness its subject matter: the difficulties of night, the beauty of eyes, the resemblances between the beloved and the stars. Observe, too, its tropes: storm-tossed crafts careen through this sequence, the lover freezes and burns, her sighs might well drown Donne's merchant ships. And note its diction: Song 2 deploys the refrain "Ay mee," and "pain" is a recurrent rhyme word. P33 localizes many of these characteristics and draws attention to their prevalence elsewhere, for this lyric orders joy to fly away, compares the beloved to a sun, laments his absence, and refers to "fires of love" (14).

The sequence also resembles other Petrarchan collections in the juxtaposition of narrative and lyric elements and the fragility of the types of control and authority often connected with the former. Despite the presence of narrativity in a set of mythological stories, it is rarely associated with the kinds of authority that Astrophil achieves through his storytelling. P1 exemplifies the paradoxical links between storytelling and absence of agency which are more subtly present throughout the sequence, and the fact that almost all narratives are located in a mythological realm may suggest that she cannot achieve narrativity in other worlds. Certainly her typically Petrarchan emphasis on entrapment in a static, obsessive state of mind testifies to what threatens the very possibility of narrative in those worlds. Perhaps Mary Wroth is attracted to concatentio, the repetitive enchaining that she deploys in her crown sequence, partly because it incorporates some narrative qualities in what is predominantly a lyric sequence.

But the connections between this sequence and Petrarchism go far deeper than the mannerisms of style and choices of mode I have enumerated so far. Whether or not family loyalty rendered that discourse attractive to Mary Wroth, as MacArthur has argued, it appealed to her because of

---

105 MacArthur, "'A Sydney,'" esp. p. 13. Also cf. Josephine Roberts's suggestion that
deep connections between its assumptions and her own. Certainly the Petrarcan ambivalence about poesy in general and love poetry in particular was congenial to her. Mary Wroth, like many Petrarcan poets, repeatedly draws attention to the inadequacies and dangers of what she at one point terms “that Divell speach” (P52.10) and her command of it; yet in assuming the name “Pamphilia” she allies herself with a distinguished female poet.106 Her Urania, as Mary Ellen Lamb among others has argued, demonstrates a comparable ambivalence.107 Similarly, the passivity in P1 is a version, though intensified, of the typical helplessness of the Petrarchan speaker, a point to which we will return.

Petrarchism is the genre that always looks back over its shoulder—at footprints of its lost beloved, traces of its speaker’s lost youth, poems by earlier writers. Mary Wroth, too, is preoccupied with what is past and what may be lost: her sonnet sequence manifests the customary nostalgia of Petrarchism and in so doing also signals her consciousness of the achievements of a dead father, a dead uncle, and a genre that many of her contemporaries considered moribund. Her interest in pastoral and romance has sometimes been linked with her uncle’s work in both those literary forms. Quite possibly, but it is no accident that those modes, like the Petrarchan sonnet, look backward. Nor is it an accident that her Urania quite literally fulfills the romance’s agenda of “finding what was lost” by opening on the title character, whose disappearance was lamented in the opening of Sidney’s Arcadia.

This anatomy of Mary Wroth’s Petrarchism in turn invites a genealogy. Not surprisingly, many critics, assuming an overlap between her biological and literary genetic pools, have focused on her debts to Philip and Robert Sidney.108 Certainly the influence of her uncle is clear not only in poems

---

106On the significance of that name, see Josephine A. Roberts, introduction to The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth, p. 42, and an earlier version of some of the same material, “The Biographical Problem of Pamphilia to Amphilanthus,” Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature, 1 (1982), 44.

107Lamb, Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle, esp. pp. 159–162. See also Lewalski’s suggestion that Wroth’s prose romance contrasts characters representing good and bad artists (Writing Women in Jacobean England, pp. 280–281).

that echo his (P16, for example, bears unmistakable traces of _Astrophil and Stella_ 47) but also in recurrent stylistic mannerisms. Thus, despite the predilection for lyric that I noted, when Mary Wroth does compose a narrative she develops its dramatic potential. Moschus's First Idyll merely mentions that Cupid must be tied up lest he escape, whereas in P70 Wroth refashions those events into a conflict between the errant god of love and a group of nymphs, a point to which we will return. And, like both her uncle and her father, Wroth delights in technical experimentation, deploying more stanzaic variations than are found in _Astrophil and Stella_.

Her concern with subservience and autonomy also recalls her uncle, and it is no accident that P16, one of the poems that is closest to _Astrophil and Stella_, explores that very issue. Similarly, the rapid shifts in power in Philip Sidney's sonnets find their analogue in lines such as Wroth's "Yett this Sir God, your boyship I dispise" (P8.13). (The origins of that particular line are, however, more complex than they may appear. Wroth's editor adduces an apostrophe by Sidney, " 'What now sir foole' " [ _Astrophil and Stella_ 53.7] as its antecedent, but as is so often the case, a lesser sonneteer deserves more credit than he has received. Bartholomew Griffin's generally undistinguished sequence _Fidessa_ includes a splendid line that provides a far closer source for Wroth: "I hope sir boy you'll tell me news tomorrow" [14.12].)

Acknowledging the parallels between Wroth and her uncle and father allows us to question critical assumptions that are sometimes unthinkingly deployed. In their seminal _Madwoman in the Attic_, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assume that women writers are not likely to feel the Bloomian anxiety of influence because they are estranged from male literary traditions. This hypothesis is too often baldly repeated in less thoughtful studies, and it finds its analogue in the film criticism that argues that the woman viewer cannot replicate the gaze of the male spectator—a position that is in important ways analogous to the authorial—or can do so only at the price of a kind of androgyny.

---

109 Roberts, _The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth_, p. 47.
110 Roberts, _The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth_, p. 90.
111 Bartholomew Griffin, _Fidessa, More Chaste then Kinde_ (London, 1596).
cognate theories have proved, they err in their assumption that gender is necessarily the overriding determinant of subjectivity. When Mary Wroth approaches the sonnet, her status as a Sidney may well be as important as her status as a woman. While this particular instance may at first seem so idiosyncratic as to be irrelevant to other women, I would argue that it is only an extreme case of the multiple forms of identity and identification which may challenge gender for primacy. More to the point, these alternative forms also interact complexly with gender, as Ann Rosalind Jones has shown in her important study of social, economic, and geographical conditions, such as the status of the cities of Lyon and Venice, that facilitated the writing of English and Continental women.114 In any event, the relationship among the components of subjectivity is a dynamic one, for identification should be seen more as a process than an act: at a specific moment in writing a text or, analogously, seeing a film, a previously subsidiary factor may assume new importance or the members of a group of formerly harmonious vectors may initiate a struggle for supremacy. In particular, many critics have grown accustomed to emphasizing three issues—race, class, and gender—but one needs to look not only at times those categories conflict rather than overlapping (race, class, or gender) but also at other modes of classification that may on occasion be equally important. Our own politics, in other words, should not constrain our reading of identity politics. When a woman from New York watches a film set in that city, at some points at least might not her geographical affiliations permit a spectatorship close to that often attributed to the male viewer rather than ensuring her identification with the passive object of desire? When a female professor analyzes a film for her class, might not her professional affiliation help to produce the kinds of distance that many film theorists consider necessary for the gaze but inaccessible to women because of their identification with the maternal body? Once again my concern is not to deny the profound significance of gender but to emphasize its complex interactions with other components of identity and identification,

114Jones, The Currency of Eros; Lyon and Venice are discussed in chap. 5.

an agenda encouraged by enumerating the connections between Wroth's poetry and that of her uncle and father.

Yet such enumerations also risk distracting attention from the principal analogue to her sequence. Many of Wroth's critics have been barking up the wrong family tree, for in a number of respects Wroth's closest connections are with Shakespeare, not Robert or Philip Sidney. The aim of this parallel, needless to say, is not to lend respectability to Wroth by drawing on the reserves of bardolatry which survive in our culture and even our profession despite repeated attacks. Rather, it is only by acknowledging the extraordinary affinities between Wroth and Shakespeare that one can understand both her Petrarchism and her reactions against it.116

In both its diction and sentiments, P24 sounds remarkably like Shakespeare's sonnets.

When last I saw thee, I did nott thee see,
Itt was thine Image, which in my thoughts lay
Soe lively figur'd, as noe times delay
Could suffer mee in hart to parted bee;

Pitty my loving, nay of consience give
Reward to mee in whom thy self doth live.

(1-4, 13-14)

Behind these connections lie the similarities that unite the two sequences. Sonneteers typically express doubts about their own poetic achievements, but these expressions, as we have seen, are especially intense in the two writers in question. Sonneteers generally establish a complex relationship to narrativity, but it is especially fraught in the texts of Wroth and Shakespeare: they structure their sequences in terms of groups rather than as a linear narrative, and their apparent sorties into linearity, such as the state Pamphilia seemingly realizes at the end of her crown sequence, are undermined. Having juxtaposed two contrasting forms of love (the Friend versus the Dark Lady, the Anacreontic versus the magisterial Cupid), both unsettle those binary models. “From contraries I seeke to runn Ay mee; / But contraries I can nott shunn Ay mee” (P14.9-10), Wroth writes, and Shakespeare would second both the sentiment and the lamentation it provokes.

116In “Changing the Subject,” chap. 2, Naomi J. Miller also notes some parallels between Wroth and Shakespeare, and some similarities between Wroth and Shakespeare are briefly listed by Paulissen (Love Sonnets by Lady Mary Wroth, pp. 65-69); most of the characteristics these critics identify, however, differ from the ones I discuss.
Many sonnet sequences are peopled with courtiers and friends; despite all Shakespeare's references to the world's judgments, his poems seldom present human characters like those. Wroth herself subsists in a curiously isolated world; the darkness to which she so often refers is a diurnal physical analogue. Thus, for example, whereas *Astrophil and Stella* 47 pivots on the entrance of Stella, its equivalent in Mary Wroth's sequence, *P16*, is marked by the absence of the beloved and, indeed, of any other human contact. Sometimes, as we have seen, she does recast her source as a more dramatic encounter—but its personages are typically mythological figures. These predilections, like several of the other similarities we have noted, may be connected to the ways both poets sometimes saw, or constructed, themselves as outsiders, whether because of gender in one case or because of class in the other.

In both Shakespeare and Wroth, the obsessive ideation that characterizes Petrarchism typically assumes the form of jealousy and suspicion. Wroth, like Shakespeare, is preoccupied, perhaps even obsessed, with betrayal. Witness, for example, *P65* and *P66*, which chronicle the workings of "cruell suspition" (*P66.1*). As the brooding anxieties in these texts would suggest, both Wroth and Shakespeare are intensely aware of the dangers of their own imaginations. "Thou suff'rest faulset shapes my soule t'affr ight" (*P18.5*), Wroth accuses sleep, and it is no accident that she writes so often of fancy. (That interest is manifest in the *Urania* too: its prose often recounts the distortions wrought by the imagination, and the term recurs in its poetry ["Phantsie's butt phantastiks skill" (*N18.3*)]). And in both Shakespeare and Wroth the alternative to suspicion is an ideal of constancy, an ideal that is problematized as often as it is invoked. Shakespeare localizes constancy in his dark Friend and his own love for that problematical being, and Wroth, in her approach to love.

This alternative genealogy clarifies Wroth's attraction to Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism. Like Shakespeare, she is drawn to the discourse inspired by the *Rime sparse* partly because several of its characteristics conform so closely to her own subjectivity—which, of course, they may also have helped to form. Hence when she reacts against it, she, like Shakespeare, above all is rejecting not merely a series of literary mannerisms but rather one side of herself. And she, like Shakespeare and so many other writers,

---

117 Wroth's isolation is discussed by Gary Waller in *The Sidney Family Romance: Mary Wroth, William Herbert, and the Early Modern Construction of Gender* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 204–206. I regret that this study appeared after I had finished my work on Wroth.

118 Her interest in betrayal is also noted in Roberts, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, p. 46.
struggles to achieve an anti-Petrarchan stance that proves no more stable than Petrarchism.

To stress the connections between Wroth and Shakespeare, however, is not to deny the distinctive role gender plays in her Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism—distinctive, but also nuanced in ways that demand a qualified and cautious critical response. Although many feminist studies of the relationship between gender and genre have been incisive, the less successful ones exemplify the by now familiar dangers of essentialism, positing as they do a monolithic female version of the genre in question. Often, too, they assume it is more skillful and appealing than its antitype, the monolithic male version, thus understandably but unfortunately offering a reversed analogue to patriarchal condescension, much as some of the less trenchant versions of gay and lesbian criticism sometimes present heterosexual love as an imperfect version of its alternative.

In this case, critics who assess the relationship of gender and genre need to beware not only of subscribing to these oversimplifications but also of labeling as distinctively female those qualities that are also gendered male in Petrarchism. In particular, as we have already observed, Mary Wroth's sonnets often express doubts about her ability to write or the value of her compositions. Thus in P45 she laments,

Nor can I as those pleasant witts injoy
My owne fram'd words, which I account the dross
Of purer thoughts.

(5-7)

"Fram'd" refers primarily to the process of composition (a usage that just might have been sparked by the unusual density of what were known as "timber-framed" houses in the county of Kent, where Penshurst is situated), but it could also mean "to adapt, adjust, fit," and in fact Wroth's writing involves a series of adaptations.19 More to our purposes now, however, the lines denigrate her verse. Similarly, in Song I she evokes a shepherdess, clearly an alter ego for Pamphilia, who writes on bark and whose poetry will be preserved only "if some such lover come . . . And place them on my tombe" (42, 44). (In the Urania, Pamphilia carves a poem, which appears in the standard modern edition of Wroth's poetry as U5, onto a tree.) This denigration of artistic achievement might be seen simply as a gendered response—until one acknowledges how common those doubts are in poems by male sonneteers. Similarly, although composing sonnets is

19OED, s.v. "frame," "framed."
certainly a transgressive act for a woman, The Apology for Poetry reminds us that choosing love lyrics over religious hymns could be interpreted as transgressive for a male as well.

The argument that qualities sometimes labeled female are in fact gendered more ambiguously serves once again to redefine, not deny, the significance of gender. I have suggested that in some instances the counterdiscourses of Petrarchism are gendered female, and in the case at hand, Wroth's position as a woman may well have intensified the doubts and guilt already connected with the genre. Indeed, it is quite possible that she was attracted to Petrarchism in part because its ambivalence about writing appealed to her and allowed her at once to express and to deflect her ambivalences under the cover of generic convention. (The same potentialities are realized in her responses to the passivity of the Petrarchan lover.) Mary Wroth's hesitancy about writing is overdetermined, with gender an important but by no means exclusive factor.

Similarly, discussions of gender and genre often emphasize that a female writer destabilizes gender within the text itself. Fair enough, and in this instance the absence of physical descriptions of Amphilanthus draws attention to such shifts. At the same time, however, the first three chapters of this study impel us to admit that the destabilization in question is different in degree, not kind, from what is customarily effected in sonnets. For if the positions of male and female so often elide even in male-authored sonnets, if the sonneteer and his lady bear equally fraught relationships to speech and engage in an often unresolved struggle for power, then the changes brought about when a woman writes sonnets will be more subtle than literary studies sometimes assume, though no less significant.

What, then, are those changes in the case of Wroth in addition to those problematical issues of guilt about writing and destabilized gender? The presence of images of birth and miscarriage is striking and has been noted by Naomi J. Miller among others. Some other thought-provoking pos-

120For a different but not incompatible analysis, see Jones, The Currency of Eros, p. 149; she finds in the claims of poetic failure a “false modesty” about lyrics that in fact demonstrate their author's constancy and virtuosity.

121In the unpublished paper “More I Still Undoe: Louise Labé, Mary Wroth, and the Petrarchan Discourse,” Roger Kuin offers perceptive insights into how the absence of pronouns in Wroth reveals our presuppositions about gender; my argument qualifies his by suggesting that other Petrarchan sequences typically destabilize gender as well. I thank the author for making his work available to me.

sibilities necessarily remain more speculative. Wroth repeatedly evokes encounters between male and female mythological characters, as we have already observed; in addition to recasting the sources of P1 in those terms, in P70 she reshapes her sources to emphasize the nymphs’ clash with the god of love. Similarly, in P58 she displaces Pamphilia’s power struggles with Amphilanthus, always covert at best in this sequence, onto Venus’s conflicts with Cupid. Surely this attraction to mythological narratives manifests not only her uncle’s interest in dramatic confrontations but also her own concern with clashes between men and women. The point is not that Amphilanthus is absent from the collection but that he is, as it were, distanced, dispersed among many characters, dismembered so that he can be less painfully remembered. On one level this dispersal exemplifies the deflection that is so characteristic of the Petrarchan mode. On another level, however, the strategy is gendered, for Wroth’s response to the betrayal that is a dark undercurrent in this sequence and a central plot line in *Urania* is, like that of so many members of subordinated groups, passive aggressive: rather than attacking Amphilanthus directly, she diminishes him by implicitly associating him with the boyish Cupid and punishes him by covertly linking him with the Cupid who suffers for his trickery.

Yet Wroth’s Cupid is often victorious, and his triumphs direct our attention to another way gender may affect Wroth’s Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism. In rejecting one version of Cupid, Mary Wroth eagerly turns to—and does obeisance to—another. Although the notion of Cupid as a powerful monarch is hardly unique to this sequence, Wroth’s emphasis on it and on her own subservience is striking. Notice, for example, how appositive phrases draw attention to Cupid’s role as monarch:

```
To thee then lord commander of all harts,
Ruller of owr affections kinde, and just
Great King of Love.
```

(P89.9–11)

In other words, whereas many versions of Petrarchan counterdiscourses stress the lover’s newfound freedom, the love Wroth espouses is associated with being the loyal subject of Cupid. In P8 she addresses Love, lamenting, ‘I ame thy subject, conquer’d, bound to stand” (6); in the crown sequence she delightedly accepts subjection to a different version of the god of love. Thus, as I suggested earlier, Wroth figures her escape from the labyrinth of Petrarchism not as a reassertion of autonomy but as an acceptance of

submission to a higher, better authority. In this respect, then, her discourse is double-voiced in Showalter's sense, and despite all the independence Wroth achieves in other ways, she draws attention to her acceptance of hierarchical power. Wroth may well be attracted to the common rendition of Cupid as powerful monarch in part because of her own history: perhaps unease about her deviation from social norms, whether as debtor, mother of one or more illegitimate children, or poet, encourages her to uphold political norms by emphasizing Pamphilia's willing subervience to a powerful king.

To Petrarch and Petarchism, however, neither Wroth nor Pamphilia is willingly subservient. Indeed, the sequence includes not one but a group of successive attempts to dethrone those monarchs, thus recalling Mark Twain's observation that giving up smoking could not be difficult, for he had done it so often. First, then, P46 contrasts false and true love:

It is nott love which you poore fooles do deeme
That doth apeare by fond, and outward showes
Of kissing, toying, or by swearings glose,
O noe thes are farr off from loves esteeme;

Alas they ar nott such that can redeeme
Love lost, or wining keepe those chosen blowes
Though oft with face, and lookes love overthrowse
Yett soe slight conquest doth nott him beeseeme,

'Tis nott a showe of sighes, or teares can prove
Who loves indeed which blasts of fained love
Increase, or dy as favors from them slide;

Butt in the soule true love in safety lies
Guarded by faith which to desart still hies,
And yett kinde lookes doe many blessings hide.

Wroth's emphasis on sighs and tears, those staples of Petarchism, encourages us to number that discourse among the adversaries being attacked. Yet this lyric immediately recalls Shakespeare's counterdiscourses in the breadth of its targets: clearly the love made of "fond, and outward showes" (2) has multiple referents, and thus this sonnet, like so many of Shakespeare's, casts its net widely and in so doing associates Petarchism with many modes of behavior. The type of love being attacked, then, relies on specious appearances in contrast to the "inward language" about which Anne Ferry
SIDNEY, SHAKESPEARE, WROTH

has written so well.\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Toying} no doubt has its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century meaning of “amorous dalliance” in this context, but an allusion to children’s playthings, which would serve to connect this lyric with Wroth’s \textit{Anacreontic} renditions of Cupid as mischievous child, may be present as well.\textsuperscript{125} The reference to “glose[d],” or deceptive, “swearings” (3) associates Petrarchism with misleading language, language that both testifies to the Fall and tempts further falls. Against this deceived and deceptive love the poem plays the true love described in the last three lines. Notice how for all the emphasis on its safety the allusion to a guardian also reminds us that such safety may be imperiled, even besieged. That siege was to be enacted in Wroth’s more extensive treatment of anti-Petrarchism, her crown sonnets. And notice, too, how Wroth’s characteristic obscurity generates a final line that may complicate the binary contrast she establishes. Is the suggestion that faith is not enough, for love needs “kinde lookes” (14) as well? Do those looks contrast with the “outward showes” (2) condemned earlier or modulate that condemnation? And, in particular, might “hide” (14) uneasily recall earlier suggestions of deceit?

The issues adumbrated in P46 are developed at length in the crown poems. Here too Wroth sets up a contrast between the love she condemns, which encompasses Petrarchism among many other related targets, and a safer and surer love. And once again the high ground from which Pamphilia speaks proves unstable, crumbling away in the course of this series of lyrics.

The crown is preceded by a kind of palinode: in P76 the speaker asks pardon for having appeared to question Cupid’s power, surely a curious introduction to a counterdiscourse. The paradox is apparently resolved by the fact that Wroth plays two different Cupids against each other, but the reader’s initial unease anticipates the recognition at the end of the sequence that her attempt to establish this neat contrast has failed. In any event, in P76 the juxtaposition of political (“For treason never lodged in my mind” [3]) and religious (“thy endless prayse . . . thy glory” [12, 13]) language establishes the coordinates by which the beneficent Cupid will be mapped.

The prosodic structure of the crown sequence prepares us for the complexity of that mapping. An Italian poetic form in which the final line of one poem or stanza recurs in the first line of the next, the crown had attracted a number of poets before, including Wroth’s father and uncle. She might also have known Donne’s “La Corona,” especially if the scholars who argue that a copy of it was sent to Magdalen Herbert are correct.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{124}Ferry, \textit{Inward Language}.

\textsuperscript{125}OED, s.v. “toy,” “toying.”

\textsuperscript{126}On the possibility that “La Corona” was sent to Magdalen Herbert, see Herbert J. C. Grierson, ed., \textit{The Poems of John Donne}, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), 2:
Robert Sidney left his own crown incomplete—is Wroth in a sense attempting to complete it and thus to achieve not only spiritual resolution but also an analogue to it in poetic closure? If so, the indeterminate ending of her crown is all the more telling. In any event, in choosing the form Wroth overtly puns on its association with monarchy (“And give a crowne unto thy endless prayse” [P76.12]), thus justifying her decision to crown Cupid poetically. In all these ways she implicitly contrasts false love and false poesy with the latest improved model. And yet in selecting a form grounded in repetition, she also recalls the repetitiveness of Petrarchism and the propensity of its counterdiscourses for reenacting what they aim to reject.

Subterranean though they may be, these implications of Wroth’s prosody become overt in the sequence itself. “In this strang labourinth how shal I turne?” (P77.1) refers to Petrarchism inter alia, especially because Petrarch himself fashions the image of a labyrinth of love. (The spelling of “labourinth” may also contain a punning reminder of how much work is involved in either of the two types of love Wroth evokes: both her concern with that travail and her wordplay in expressing it suggest that in Pamphilia to Amphilianthus, like the Urania, she is Spenser’s heir as well as Sidney’s and Shakespeare’s.)

The reference in P78 to “idle phant’sie” (4), one of Wroth’s most recurrent antagonists, further helps us to define the behavior that the crown sonnets eschew. The overlapping and often indistinguishable terms fancy and fantasy were of considerable interest in the seventeenth century, as the lengthy discussions of them in Hobbes’s Leviathan and in Davenant’s “Preface to Gondibert” and Hobbes’s answer to it would suggest. Imagination and fancy were often used as synonyms in the period, and Hobbes’s treatment manifests a deep suspicion of fancy unrestrained by judgment. In Wroth’s case, the term involves distortions of the imagination; some sug-
gestion of the distortions effected in and by literary discourses may well be present as well, again directing her attacks at least in part against Petrarchism. Paradoxically, however, the type of love celebrated in the crown sonnets enables her to become a successful artist—"Love will a painter make you" (P83.9)—as Lewalski points out. And given the Neo-Stoic resonances of her emphasis on constancy, should one not also adduce the Neo-Stoic concept of opinion in interpreting fancy? Opinion, according to Justus Lipsius, "is vaine, uncertaine, deceitfull, evil in counsell, evil in judgement. It depriveth the mind of Constancie and veritie. To day it desireth a thing, to morrowe it defieth the same." Surely this is an apt gloss on "idle phant'sie" as presented in P78 and elsewhere in the sequence.

If P78 aids us in understanding the type of love Wroth eschews in the crown, it also clearly spells out the alternative values she espouses, which may explain why it is accompanied in the manuscript with the note "This should be first."

When chaste thoughts guide us then owr minds ar bent
To take that good which ills from us remove,
Light of true love, brings fruite which none repent
Butt constant lovers seeke, and wish to prove;

Love is the shining starr of blessings light;
The fervent fire of zeale, the roote of peace,
The lasting lampe fed with the oyle of right;
Image of fayth, and wombe for joyes increase.

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

(5-14)

The emphasis on "chaste thoughts" (5) signals both the rejection of lust and the focus on the internal, on the mind of the lover rather than the relationship between lovers, that characterizes the whole sequence. The religious language throughout emphasizes that Wroth is writing about a spiritual love and the heightened spiritual peace it brings—but not, interestingly, turning away from human love in favor of the worship of God, as Barnes and others did.

132See Roberts, The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth, p. 129.
Wroth's characteristic preoccupation with constancy emerges in line eight of this poem. Given the obvious resonance of this ideal in the realm of love, many critics have slighted its grounding in the Neo-Stoicism that was enjoying such a vogue in the early seventeenth century. Constancy, Seneca emphasizes throughout "De Constantia Sapientis," shields us from both injuries and insults, which is very much the role Wroth assigns it in her own city of dreadful night. Perhaps her observations and experiences of courtly gossip, manifest in her decision to cast Urania as a roman à clef, attracted her to the promise of freedom from insults; perhaps her interest in the poetry of Donne and Jonson, both of whom were influenced by Stoicism, intensified her interest in the school. And, given other signs of her independence, she may well have been challenged to appropriate for her own purposes the author who opens his essay "De Constantia Sapientis" on the observation that the relationship between Stoics and other philosophers resembles that between men and women in that the first was born to command, and the second to obey (1.1)—and proceeds to declare that some men are mad enough to assume that even a woman could insult them (14.1).

Later sonnets within the crown further elucidate and develop Wroth's values. As many other critics have noted, she implicitly contrasts the mischievous Anacreontic Cupid evoked in many of her other sonnets with the majestic god of love celebrated here. Thus she draws on traditions contrasting two Cupids, or Cupid and his brother Anteros, whose tangled roots include a putative reference in Plato, an emblem by Alciati, and poems by several members of the Pléiade. It is quite possible that Mary Wroth, a female poet working in a male tradition, was cognizant of and intrigued by Marguerite de Navarre's treatment of the idea. In any event, her deployment of the two Cupids once again establishes her predilection for binaries and echoes the contrast between another binary set, the unreliable Venus and the trustworthy Cupid evoked in P85.

But seventeenth-century English monarchs were not strong candidates for life insurance policies, and Wroth's Cupid is no exception. As some other critics have recognized, the values espoused in the crown do not survive intact at its conclusion.


131 For example, Jones (The Currency of Eros, p. 152) argues that the end of the series "calls Pamphilia's knowledge of true love into question" but traces this and other contradictions to the expiatory motives that she finds in the sequence. In two studies, Roberts finds in the crown poems an unsuccessful attempt at idealization (The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth, p. 45, and "The Biographical Problem of Pamphilia to Amphionthus," p. 50).
Yett other mischief fail not to attend,  
As enemies to you, my foes must bee;  
Curst jealousie doth all her forces bend  
To my undoing; thus my harness I see.

Soe though in Love I fervently doe burne,  
In this strange labourinth how shall I tume?  

(P90.9-14)

Admittedly, the enemies are not granted a clear-cut victory; but surely the mode of love they attack is at least imperiled. The labyrinth here comes to represent, in addition to the tangled meanings it assumed earlier in the sequence, the confused struggle between the norms Wroth has established and the "mischiefs" (9) that threaten them. The verb "attend" (9) perhaps gestures towards courtly attendance and hence the court as a site of the threats in question. In addition to these resonances, in "mischiefs" the once illuminating, now shopworn new historicist attraction to the term re-present acquires new vitality, for the many other mischiefs towards which the passage gestures re-present Petrarchism itself in all the senses of that verb. Thus the repetition of the opening lines of the sequence, the recurrence of blind turnings within the maze, and the return of the Petrarchian image of that labyrinth all signal the appearance once again of the dilemmas of Petrarchism—a discourse grounded in repetition, a discourse that inspires counterdiscourses based on reenactment.

Those counterdiscourses repeatedly attempt to distance themselves from the Petrarchan dilemmas they instead often replicate, and Mary Wroth's sequence is no exception: the crown is followed by other poems that record the effort to abandon a destructive love for a purer, more constant alternative.135 In particular, the sequence ends on a lyric that apparently fulfills the compromised aims of the crown poems and in so doing again stages a conflict between a love of inconstant "phant'sies" (3) on the one hand and a love of constancy and peace on the other.

My muse now hapy, lay thy self to rest,  
Sleepe in the quiett of a faithfull love,  
Write you noe more, butt lett thes phant'sies move  
Some other harts, wake nott to new unrest.

135Beilin claims unpersuasively that the sonnets after the crown sequence refer covertly to divine love (Redeeming Eve, pp. 240-241); I maintain that that ideal is as elusive and unstable as the attacks on Petrarchism in many earlier sequences.
Butt if you study, bee those thoughts adrest
To truth, which shall eternall goodnes prove;
Injoying of true joye, the most, and best,
The endles gaine which never will remove;

Leave the discoure of Venus, and her sunn
To young beeginers, and theyr brains inspire
With storys of great love, and from that fire
Gett heat to write the fortunes they have wunn,

And thus leave off, what's past showes you can love,
Now lett your constancy your honor prove,

Pamphilia.

The poem also recalls earlier lyrics in its emphasis on writing as a prime symptom—and perhaps even a prime source—of the illness of love: the connections between established modes of writing and of loving elsewhere in the sequence encourage us to attach to “discourse” (9) the full Fou­cauldian senses. However one interprets the word, lines nine to twelve, and especially the phrase “storys of great love” (11), do suggest some lingering attraction to “the discourse of Venus.”

And, indeed, this is not the only trace of a lingering attraction. To be sure, in most respects the poem is firmly committed to both signaling and supporting the abandonment of destructive love. The references to sleep and to Venus and Cupid clearly link this lyric to the opening one, providing a cyclical thematic repetition not unlike the repetitions in the crown itself; the closural force of the poem is intensified by both those allusions to rest and words suggesting finality (“noe more” [3], “endles” [8], “leave off” [13]). Yet this text is not quite as definitive as some critics have assumed. Much as a refrain establishes closure and undermines it by raising the possibility of yet another refrain, so this poem cannot help but remind us of Wroth’s previous assays at subscribing to a purer, more serene love. We know that Wroth generally composed carefully, structuring the first part of the sequence around groups of six lyrics followed by a song; and

136 Compare Naomi J. Miller’s observation that the speaker gives up the helpless dreaming in which she was engaged at the beginning of the sequence (“Rewriting Lyric Fictions,” p. 304); she notes other connections with the opening sonnet as well.
137 Beilin, for example, finds in the poem a more definitive farewell to passion (Re redeeming Eve, pp. 241–242).
138 See Roberts, The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth, p. 63. Beilin acutely observes that “the regular ordering of the sonnets is ironic, belying the disorder of Pamphilia’s mind” (Re redeeming Eve, p. 234).
we know that she rearranged the sonnets from an earlier version of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. Hence if she had wanted to evoke steady and successful progress towards "the quiett of a faithfull love" (2), she surely would have placed P46 and the crown sonnets immediately before the culmination of the sequence; by not doing so, she encourages us to feel uneasy about its conclusion.

Throughout *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, then, Wroth plays two types of love against each other, a conflict that encompasses but is by no means confined to the dialogue between Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism. The negative alternative is associated with psychic instability and its interpersonal source and symptom, inconstancy—or, to put it another way, it is associated with restless movement of many types. In contrast, here as in the *Urania* Wroth proffers the ideal of constancy and spirituality; in emphasizing these values and associating them with stasis, she again reminds us to list prominently not only Shakespeare but also Spenser when diagramming her inheritance.

But why, especially given her general preference for lyric rather than narrative, does Wroth so often stage the conflict between two loves as a clash between two personages? We have already considered some explanations: an attraction, perhaps familial, to dramatic encounters; a desire to deflect conflicts within herself, or between Pamphilia and Amphilanthus, onto a safer site. Lamb has argued persuasively for a similar pattern of deflection in the *Urania*. Probably it is also significant that Venus sometimes represents lustful, irresponsible love, whereas her son symbolizes the more desirable alternative. And it may be telling that, as Lord Denny's satirical poem about her testifies, Wroth herself was sometimes associated with the very qualities she attributes to Venus. In other words, Wroth may well be at once denying guilt for sexual licentiousness by displacing it onto her mythological creatures and admitting or at least acknowledging guilt by displacing it onto a woman, not a man. The retreat to political norms which lies behind her loyal enthronement of Cupid finds its analogue in this acceptance of the conventional gendering of desire.

The presentation of Venus, then, circles back to the problems about autonomy on which this study of Wroth opened, and we are now in a position to address two issues. First, how can a woman writer create a voice within the Petrarchan tradition, given that it is generally interpreted as deeply masculine and even masculinist? This question resembles the con-

---

139 On that revision, see Roberts, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, pp. 63–64.
140 See esp. Lamb's argument about Antissia (*Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle*, pp. 162–169).
troversial problem in film studies to which I alluded earlier: can the female viewer achieve any position other than masochistic identification with the feminine in the film, which is typically denied agency and constructed as the object of the gaze? And, second, how do we reconcile the autonomy Wroth apparently achieves by reshaping her genre or the freedom Pamphilia seemingly achieves by virtually erasing her lover, with evidence of continuing servitude to Petrarchan conventions, to familial practices, and to Cupid himself? In this strange labourinth how shall we turne?

Following a thread woven earlier in this study helps guide us through the maze of the first question, the problem of creating a female voice within a male genre. Generalizations about the masculinity of Petrarchism again need to be modulated not only by the activities of women poets on the Continent but also by the workings of that tradition in England and elsewhere, especially its tendency to elide gender boundaries. Petrarch himself is associated with the veil and footprints he elsewhere assigns to Laura. The agency connected with speech is sometimes denied to the Petrarchan poet and bestowed on his lady. And in important senses that poet is the object of his mistress's gaze. These characteristics of Petrarchism neither deny the anomaly of having an Englishwoman write sonnets nor lessen Wroth's achievement in doing so, but they cast that anomaly as an acknowledgment and heightening of patterns already in the tradition: Wroth is responsible not for introducing the erosion of boundaries but for intensifying an ongoing process. In particular, while some critics have rightly assumed that her constancy is a patriarchal ideal for women, it is also true that the Petrarchan poet is often presented as constant in his devotion for all his desire to escape it—obsessively constant. Moreover, we observed that in ascribing this ideal to the Stoic wise man, Seneca explicitly emphasizes its inaccessibility to, as it were, Cato's sister. A number of seventeenth-century women do express interest in Senecanism; but doing so may well have been seen as transgressive in light of Seneca's injunctions. If so, Pamphilia's constancy, far from simply reverting to patriarchal definitions of the feminine, further obscures the boundaries between male and female, a process also enacted in different ways in many male-authored sequences.

That process may help us to describe, but cannot help us to explain, the contours of our second labyrinth, the apparent juxtaposition of the originality celebrated by some critics with the subservience lamented by others. The mythological tale in P1, in which the passive, dreaming Pamphilia watches her female alter ego give directions to Cupid and also perhaps identifies with Cupid, encourages us to look for our answers by identifying

142See, e.g., Lamb, Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle, pp. 126–127.
the multiple roles Pamphilia and Wroth play and by seeking the sources of that script. Yet another reason Wroth creates not one but two Cupids and bifurcates Cupid's role between himself and Venus in that opening poem is that she is projecting onto her mythological characters the multiple and often contradictory roles she herself assumes. If she is a cross-dresser in the sense defined in the paragraph above, she is an actor in doubled parts as well.

To begin with, she is undoubtedly the forceful innovator, appropriating a genre to her own ends. Indeed, in so doing she sometimes achieves the types of autonomy for which the authors of other counterdiscourses struggle in vain. Delighting in the revision of previously drafted scripts, whether written by herself or her predecessors, Wroth is particularly adept at transforming a potential liability of Petrarchism into a strength. In one scenario common to love poetry, the passivity of the Petrarchan lover is a sign of weakness and failure; in Wroth's revised scenario, by adducing the concept of constancy, she turns that passivity into a positive value. In one script of Petrarchism the woman is an object to be investigated; Wroth rewrites this situation to investigate her own emotions and thus wrest agency from objectification. And in the most common Petrarchan plot the lover loses the beloved; Wroth plots, as it were, to renounce him, thus again achieving agency.

At the same time, as we have seen, the transformations are not wholly successful or consistent; she repeatedly denies that agency even in circumstances where she could easily lay claim to it. Her poetry is figured not as an endless monument to herself or the immortalized beloved but rather as scribblings on tree bark that might or might not be saved by a passerby. Her freedom from the Anacreontic Cupid is expressed through her subjection to his majestic alter ego.

Given the achievements of feminist criticism, explanations for why a woman writer might skid between announcing her independence from a lover or a literary tradition on the one hand and manifesting signs of submission on the other might seem at best unnecessary, at worst fatuous. Poststructuralist interpretations of divided and unstable subjectivity also present such slippages as predictable, even inevitable (indeed, Freudian explanations of personality, too often oversimplified dismissively by literary critics, do not necessarily posit the sort of stable and unitary ego their antagonists attribute to them). But in fact further explanations are called for: both the cinematic theory of the twentieth century and the intellectual and literary history of the Renaissance can add nuances to our assumptions about Wroth's ambivalence.

Critics might adapt the cinematic theory of the masquerade and posit an
intensification of femininity which aims to expose its artificiality. Or, alternatively, we could maintain instead that Wroth's behavior is a feint to disguise her true subversiveness. Both arguments assume skillful role-playing, but the first involves an agenda of exposure, and the second, one of concealment. I suggest that an inhabitant of the court such as Wroth is likely to try to do both, hoping at once to communicate her rebelliousness to sympathizers and to conceal it from antagonists. Yet these theories, however applicable to Wroth, need to be modulated with the recognition that Petrarchism inherently involves these elisions of gender; Wroth is playing on a generic tradition as well as playing against it. And, above all, they need to be bracketed with the reminder that the best laid plans of Petrarchian authors, no less than cinematic auteurs, full often go astray, once again activating that seesaw between success and failure. For the theories of masquerade and camouflage both assume that Wroth and Pamphilia retain control over their strategies. But, as we saw when reading Sidney, a masquerade may become a mask one cannot peel away. Not the least of the parallels between Wroth and Shakespeare is their knowledge of the dyer's hand. In other words, in orchestrating masquerade and camouflage to explain Wroth, we need to posit a more dynamic and more troubling instrumentality in which the actor gets carried away with the lines and is herself half persuaded of her submission to a social or literary convention or to a male figure. I am arguing, then, not for a consistent and unitary interpretation but for one that recognizes a volatile admixture of control and contradiction, strategy and self-deception.

The sources of that admixture include not only the biographical and cultural pressures to which feminism and new historicism rightly direct our attention but also Wroth's intellectual and poetic models: they intersect and interact in Wroth's texts as they should do in our criticism. Like many other students of Tudor and Stuart literature, I have noted that translation is a mode of writing often associated with women in that tradition, and Wroth would have been especially aware of that connection because of her aunt. Though, as her critics often emphasize, Wroth eschewed the role in question, translation might well have provided a metaphor for the varied and shifting ways she, as it were, translates the conventions of Petrarchism and the gendered assumptions of her culture. For some translators are far more concerned with literal fidelity than others. And a given practitioner of that art often does not have a consistent relationship to her or his text: some passages may strive to follow the original closely, others to interpret and reinterpret its complexities. (It is no accident that twentieth-century professionals in the field are variously assigned two significantly different titles, translator and interpreter.) In addition, her sequence may well be
shaped by Stoicism in yet another respect. That school, Herschel Baker reminds us, is clouded by a paradox: “Of all forms of Renaissance neopaganism worked into the fabric of Christianity it advocated the most ruthless individualism; yet it also put man's freedom under the severest check. The Neo-Stoics could urge the utmost liberty for man's conscience and conduct precisely because they could not conceive of freedom without law.”

Might not Neo-Stoicism have appealed to Wroth in part because it stages the very paradox of constrained autonomy on which her sequence pivots? And might it then not have provided a model for her own explorations of that paradox, with the beneficent Cupid of the crown assuming the role of law?

Above all, however, Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism provide the most significant model for Wroth's relationship to autonomy and submission. Petrarchan discourses define themselves diacritically, through contrast with other writers and other selves—and yet so frequently incorporate that which they reject within themselves. The counterdiscourses of Petrarchism, as we have seen, struggle for autonomy, struggle to dethrone conventions of writing and loving—and yet so often acknowledge that Petrarch's Cupid remains their deity. Thus they offer a blueprint both for the slippage between success and failure or power and powerlessness in male subjectivity and for the situation of a woman attempting to achieve freedom from a man and a convention and to appropriate a genre that both is and is not her birthright. The counterdiscourses of Petrarchism, then, can mime the problematics of female subjectivity as well as male, and Wroth is attracted to the sonnet not only as the genre of her male relatives but also as a potential model for her own subjectivity.

That attraction generates poetry that variously manifests interpellations and effects new interpretations, poetry that variously reinterprets and reenacts problems that had appeared to be solved earlier. Both the reinterpretation and the reenactment ally Wroth with other, male speakers of the Petrarchan discourse and counterdiscourse—and at the same time establish a distinctively female idiolect. Play it again, Pamphilia.
