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# WAS MARY WROTH SHAKESPEARE'S DARK LADY?

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**ABSTRACT:** In 2004, Jonathan Gibson wrote an article entitled "Cherchez la Femme" in which he suggested that Lady Mary Wroth, Shakespeare's contemporary, might have been the Dark Lady who features in sonnets 127 to 152. He is the first and only person to have done so, probably because both authors have always been studied separately.

William Herbert, Wroth's cousin and lover, is believed to have been Shakespeare's Young Man who features in sonnets 1 to 126. Furthermore, the relationship between Wroth's characters Pamphilia and Amphilanthus is believed to have been based in the love affair between her and William Herbert. Besides the fact that both *The Sonnets* (1 to 126) and *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus* seem to have been dedicated to him, there is evidence that Wroth also addresses Shakespeare in her work.

What is even more significant than this is that Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* holds intriguing similarities with Shakespeare's *The Sonnets*. Indeed, the physical description and other types of information about the Dark Lady contained in *The Sonnets* match the bibliographical information we have of Wroth. Furthermore, like Shakespeare's *The Sonnets*, Wroth's work also consists of a sonnet sequence followed by a lover's complaint.

In my paper, I explore similarities and links between the two works such as these, and explain the reasons why Gibson's hypothesis could be right.

In his 2004 article, "Cherchez la Femme," Jonathan Gibson analyses Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, the first Petrarchan sequence in English by a woman, and argues that the relationship between the two characters was inspired by real facts in Wroth's life (Gibson 12). Indeed, the fact that Wroth was romantically involved with her first cousin, William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, has influenced criticism on her work for almost two decades, since it became part of the scholarly mainstream with Roberts's edition

of her texts in 1983. It is also known that, "in circumstances that have to be pieced together largely from obscure family records and discrete letters and papers" (Waller 19), Wroth had two illegitimate children who were always assumed to have been born as a result of her love affair with Herbert. Gibson has no doubt that Amphilanthus (meaning "lover of two,") to whom the poems are addressed, and Pamphilia (meaning "all-loving") were modelled on Herbert and Wroth, as many facts about the characters coincide with those we know about the two cousins (Gibson 12).

Slightly more controversial than that, however, is whether the same William Herbert was the addressee of another sonnet sequence, *The Sonnets* by William Shakespeare. Indeed, a considerable number of scholars believe Herbert to be the famous "Master W. H." (Paterson 3) who features in the dedication and, therefore, the "Young Man" to whom sonnets 1 to 126 are addressed. Besides posing these pertinent questions that so many scholars have long tried to find an answer to, Gibson's analysis goes even further:

If *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets* really were written about the same young man, what does that tell us about Wroth? Could she be... Shakespeare's so-called "dark lady," the faithless subject of sonnets 127-52?... In *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus* do we see the "dark lady" writing back? (Gibson 12).

Although *The Sonnets* were published as early as 1609 and *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* not until 1621, Wroth's manuscript is believed to date back to 1613, constituting – according to Gibson – a "far more plausible" response to Shakespeare (13). It is this manuscript which reveals a very important similarity between the two works: they are both sonnet sequences followed by complaints. Indeed, unlike the printed version of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, the manuscript text ends in a complaint, an additional 312-line narrative in which a woman who has been abandoned by her lover expresses her sorrow. This, according to Gibson, is significant, since it shows that in its earliest version, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* "conformed to the conventions of a particular tradition of sonnet writing" (12), as did other Elizabethan sequences such as Shakespeare's *The Sonnets*, which is followed by *A Lover's Complaint*.

At this point, one has to wonder why Jonathan Gibson is the first person to suggest Wroth as a candidate for Shakespeare's Dark Lady and to notice the similarities between the works of the two authors. The answer to that question lies in the fact that, as Gibson himself argues, "there seems to have been a tendency for the study of Renaissance women writers and the study of Shakespeare to move in separate worlds" (13). In Wroth's case in particular, since she was born into such a literary family, there has been the propensity to compare her writings to those of her uncle, Sir Philip Sidney, as well as her aunt, Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, and, in certain cases, her father, Sir Robert Sidney. It may be inferred, therefore, that the reason why the similari-

ties between Wroth's and Shakespeare's works have never been found is that these texts had never been studied in juxtaposition.

Furthermore, as Margaret Ezell elucidates in *Writing Women's Literary History* (1993), misconceptions about manuscript writing by women in this period have been numerous. As a consequence, the context in which their works were written has not been fully understood. Indeed, here has been a concerning tendency to believe that women's writing of the seventeenth century had no other fate than that of burning in the fire (Ezell 53). Therefore the role of women within the manuscript tradition has been extremely underestimated throughout the years. This becomes especially evident when we learn that, as Elizabeth Clarke and Jonathan Gibson affirm, some women wrote alongside male courtiers within the context of the royal Court, as well as in "potentially sinful" genres such as love poems (Clarke and Gibson 3). This, as we will see, was precisely the case with Lady Mary Wroth. Indeed, the fact that Wroth wrote in this context, combined with the links between *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus* and *The Sonnets*, makes her a very plausible candidate for the Dark Lady to whom Shakespeare's sonnets 127 to 152 are addressed.

### 1. Manuscript Practice

As Margaret Ezell affirms in the introduction to *Writing Women's Literary History*, [sic!] "the response to the announcement that one works on early modern women writers is still likely to be surprise that there were any women writers on which to work" (Ezell 12). Indeed, the general prejudice is that writing by women in the seventeenth century and before was extremely scarce, of poor quality and something that was not meant for anyone to read. As Ezell argues, critics such as Cixous and Showalter have claimed that writing from that period has very little significance in the "overall scheme of women's literature" (16), with the periods before 1700 being extremely unfavourably called the "'Dark Ages' of women's imagination" (17). It is imperative, therefore, to find out where this idea that women writers from such epochs were "isolated and unusual creatures," whose "primary audience was the fireplace," comes from (42).

Ironically, as Ezell convincingly demonstrates, the model of the silenced early modern woman writer might have been "the attempt by a twentieth-century writer to create a voice for her" (44). In fact, the idea that we have of these writers as "docile victims of a patriarchal literary system" (Miller 12) was partially created by Virginia Woolf's tale of Judith, Shakespeare's fictional sister. The way Judith's story is told, with her committing suicide after society casts her out and stops her from practicing her talent for poetry, shows that in Woolf's vision of history, "if women did write, it was over opposition and discouragement, and their writings were never intended to be read" (Ezell 46). In Ezell's words, critics have mistaken fiction for the 'force and authority of fact' (45) in their treatment of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. As

the author argues, Woolf was “an inspired analyst of the process of literary creation – but [...] not a great historian,” as she was “bound by the limitations of the historiography of her day” (49-50). According to Ezell, then, the mistake of so many critics has been to take “a text designed to be provocative and to stimulate further research into women’s lives in the past” and to treat it as a historical document (50).

Ezell alerts us to the existence of fallacies such as the one that early modern women writers wanted to see their works published in print, but that society’s beliefs and modesty itself stopped them from doing so. According to the author, the idea that “Lady Mary ‘allowed’ her works to be read in manuscript,” and that this constituted “an indirect, disguised entrance into the competitive arena of literary creation” on her part (37) is extremely erroneous.

As Ezell explains, such an argument would have been valid in the context of the nineteenth century, but shows “a lack of understanding of the workings of manuscript tradition” as it existed in Wroth’s time (37). Indeed, manuscript exchange, in the context of a coterie, was the “most common form of literary exchange” in Lady Mary Wroth’s time, as the competitive commercial market was not existent until “the ready accessibility of print in the eighteenth century” (37). The prejudice that coterie literature was nothing but “the ‘leisure’ pastime of aristocratic ladies, or a disguised means to break into serious literature” (37) meant that the context in which women such as Lady Mary Wroth wrote has not been seen for what it was: a “literary world” in which “men and women participated together and... in which women were represented and depicted as being ‘competitive’ with men” (38). Finally, the fact that women such as Wroth produced multiple copies of what has been known as “fair copy manuscripts” which, as Clarke and Gibson explain, “could be public texts, available for showing to friends and acquaintances of the poet” (Clarke and Gibson 5) shows that these women writers “were not producing these pieces with the anticipation that no one would ever see or comment on them” (Ezell 55).

In fact, in the case of women such as Wroth, it was quite the opposite. As May Paulissen explains in *The Love Sonnets of Lady Mary Wroth*, Wroth’s youth took place at a “felicitous time for English women,” as Queen Elizabeth I had “set the stage for a new appreciation and new freedom for women” (Paulissen 10). As Clarke and Gibson affirm, “a significant minority of sixteenth century girls [...] became, through private tuition, highly educated humanists” (Clarke and Gibson 3). Rowland Whyte, in a letter to Wroth’s father, praised Wroth’s education, writing: “God blesse her, she is very forward in her learning, writing and other exercises she is put to, as dawncing and the virginals” (Roberts 8). Furthermore, in the same letter, there are indications of Sir Robert’s willingness to send books for Wroth to use in her studies (8).

Lady Mary Wroth, besides benefiting from such a positive encouragement, also had the advantage of her status in society, which she received not

only from her family but also from her marriage. Indeed, even though she had been introduced to the Queen in 1602, it was not until 1604, the year in which she married Sir Robert Wroth, that Wroth became part of the “intimate circle surrounding England’s new Queen” (Paulissen 11). From then on, the location of the Wroths’ estate at Durance, Middlesex, only a few miles west of London, allowed her to actively participate in Court life and to return to her husband’s home “to play the part of the country hostess,” (14) and welcome courtiers, poets and even the King himself. Paulissen believes that it was exactly from this particular moment in Lady Mary Wroth’s life that she became acquainted with a “group of poetically inclined courtiers and professional writers” (136) and started participating in “literary soirees that not only sponsored the poets in their creativity but also stimulated creativity from the sponsors” (76). This group would, therefore, include such varied members as “wealthy patrons” like William Pembroke, Wroth’s first cousin, professional writers and “other members who wished merely to talk and to compose verse” (83). Wroth would, therefore, have joined the group as a member falling under this last category.

It has become clear to literary critics of Lady Mary Wroth’s work that her poems were written as the “direct result of companionship” (iii) and within this both aristocratic and professional coterie, between the year 1604, the date of her marriage, and 1614, the year in which her husband died and which marked a decrease in her participation in Court activities. It becomes pertinent, therefore, to identify the members who wrote alongside Wroth and influenced her writing. According to Paulissen, this list would have included, amongst men such as Ben Jonson and William Herbert – who may have been the person to introduce Lady Mary Wroth to the group in the first place – Shakespeare himself (51).

The chances that Shakespeare and Wroth had the opportunity to become acquainted are, all things considered, very good indeed. Besides being active at Court in the same period as Wroth, Shakespeare had produced *Othello* at Whitehall on the 2nd of January, only four days before she performed in Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness*, the author being a mutual friend. In this play, the Queen and a few ladies of the court painted their faces black and acted the part of “Negroes.” The presence of elements of this masque – such as the possibility of black beauty – in the characterisation of the Dark Lady seem to point towards Shakespeare’s presence during Wroth’s performance.

The possibility that they knew each other becomes even more likely if we consider just how much Wroth’s talents were appreciated by other writers at Court. Indeed, Wroth was honoured in an “exceptionally large” number of works (Roberts 22), having received dedications in fourteen publications between 1604 and 1620 (Paulissen 76). According to Roberts, this is particularly significant given the fact that, with the sole exception of Lady Anne Bacon, Wroth was the only woman who, out of the twenty two who received dedications in at least six books, did not belong either to royalty or to the

highest aristocracy (Roberts 22). In these dedications, Wroth is honoured by other poets “not just as a lady but as a maker of songs and, indeed, an author in her own right” (Miller 160). The fact that she received dedications of that character and between those particular dates is proof that she was writing poetry and sharing her manuscripts with acquaintances of hers long before the publication of her work in 1621.

Curiously, *The Sonnets* by William Shakespeare are another work that, according to the evidence we possess, seems to have been written in a manuscript and shared with a restricted group of people prior to publication. Even though *The Sonnets* were not published until 1609, Francis Mere’s reference, in 1598, to Shakespeare’s “sugred Sonnets among his private friends” (Marotti 187), has been seen as evidence that the poems had been circulating in manuscript “according to the common practise” (Martin 2). Philip Martin goes even as far as to wonder whether the word “private” should not be seen as an indication that Shakespeare might have wished his poems to be kept as such, perhaps because they were “intimate in tone and reference, intended for a few eyes only” (2). It is widely believed that, as Paulissen affirms, the writing of poems within the context of a coterie respected certain practices, such as the one of including “personal references inside the poem as a part of the game of composition” (Paulissen 64), along with “mutual stories, mutual jokes, and mutual secrets of the group” (33).

According to Paulissen, Shakespeare’s participation in a coterie like the one that has been described would explain some of the enigmatic characteristics of *The Sonnets* that have puzzled critics throughout the years, such as their lack of a chronological sequence:

The possibility that some of the sonnets were written as answer poems in response to an evening’s suggested topic or model will explain why [some critics] feel... that the sonnets were written in a “disorder for which Shakespeare could not have been responsible” (72).

It is persuasive with this evidence to think that whether the last two sonnets, number 153 and number 154, which, as Paterson argues, “form...a bizarre closing couplet of sonnets to tie up the entire sequence” (Paterson 472), were not written in accordance to a selected topic for a writing session amongst the coterie. In fact, by comparing Shakespeare’s last two sonnets with some poems written by Lady Mary Wroth, it is possible to notice certain similarities which point towards this context of composition.

Shakespeare’s description in sonnet 154 (Shakespeare 156) of how a nymph steals Cupid’s “heart-inflaming brand” (ll. 2) and tries to put it out by throwing it into a well, coming to a close with the poet’s conclusion that the water proves incapable of curing him of his passion, is so famous that the following verses will hardly sound unfamiliar:

[...] but I, my mistress' thrall,  
Came here for cure, and this by that I prove:  
Love's fire heats water, water cools not love. (ll. 12-14)

What may surprise the reader, however, is the similarity between the conclusion of this poem and that of Lady Mary's sonnet 46, first series (Roberts 114). Indeed, in Wroth's sonnet, she also describes a failed attempt to find a cure to '[l]ove's fire' (ll. 14) in water:

When hott and thirsty to a well I came  
Trusting by that to quench part of my flame,  
Butt ther I was by love afresh imbrac'd (ll. 9-11).

Moreover, it is worth noticing that the two poems share more specific similarities. The lovers in the poems look for the cure of their passion in the same place: a well. Both poems are written in the first person and present a dichotomy between water as a representative of the absence of passionate feelings and fire as a symbol of its presence. Through the use of this dichotomy, Shakespeare and Wroth convey a contrast between the initial intention of the lover of extinguishing these feelings with their ultimate renewal ("Love's fire heats water," "I was by love afresh imbrac'd").

Slightly less prominent, but still worthy of notice is the fact that both poets receive a special distinction on behalf of either Venus or her son, Cupid. In fact, in Shakespeare's sonnet 153 (Shakespeare, 155), Cupid, in order to make sure that his brand is working, touches the poet's breast ("The boy for trial needs would touch my breast" - ll. 10). On the other hand, in Lady Mary's sonnet 1, first series (Roberts 85), it is Venus who distinguishes the poetess by placing in her breast the one heart which is most consumed by love ("Butt one hart flaming more than all the rest/The goddess held, and putt it to my brest" - ll. 9-10). Furthermore, Shakespeare's verses "the bath for my help lies/Where Cupid got new fire: my mistress' eyes" (ll. 13-14) sound very much like Lady Mary's "In thes lov'd eyes which kindle Cupids fire," in sonnet 7, third series (ll. 4). Knowing how the answer poem works, as well as the fact that it is highly likely that Shakespeare and Wroth wrote within the same literary coterie, it is reasonable to wonder what other connections can be found amongst their poems, and what this can reveal about the context in which they were written.

## 2. The Dark Lady

One of the most influential opinions expressed about Shakespeare's *The Sonnets* has to be the one by James Schiffer, who declares his disbelief in the idea that the poems were merely a fictive composition, based on nothing but the poet's own imagination:

No capable poet, much less Shakespeare, intending to produce a merely dramatic series of poems, would dream of inventing a story like that of the sonnets [...] The story is very odd and unattractive. Such capacities as it has are but slightly developed. It is left obscure, and some of the poems are unintelligible to us because they contain allusions of which we can make nothing. (Schiffer 46)

However, all of this would make sense if – as Schiffer explains – the poems were only meant to be read by certain people and contained details of true events which no one but that restricted group would have knowledge of. This would also illuminate the lack of a logical organisation in the poems, as they would not have been written chronologically:

Now all this is perfectly natural if the story is substantially a real story of Shakespeare himself and of certain other persons; if the sonnets were written from time to time as the relations between the persons changed, and sometimes in reference to particular incidents; and if they were written for [...] people who knew the details and incidents of which we are ignorant. But it is all unnatural, well-nigh incredibly unnatural, if, with the most skeptical critics, one regards the sonnets as a free product of imagination. (46)

The same opinion is shared by Ilona Bell, in “Rethinking Shakespeare’s Dark Lady” (2010), who argues the following:

[as] in Shakespearean England love poetry was considered the language of, and was regularly used for, courtship and seduction, [...] [r]eaders of the first edition would have assumed they were overhearing a private lyric dialogue between Shakespeare, the young man and the dark lady (Bell 295).

According to Bell, just in the same way that Shakespeare’s plays contain certain stage directions, the sonnets also possess indications, which are meant to guide the reader into seeing them as an “ongoing private conversation between lovers” (295). The function of the sonnets, therefore, is not to be “primarily narrative or explanatory,” but to work as “performative utterances, written to be read or recited to the man or the lady, or epistolary persuasions, sent to one or both of them” (296). Bell declares, therefore, that she belongs to the group of critics who believe that “Shakespeare would have produced a more successful plot and more fully embodied characters had he set out to construct a poetic fiction” (296). After considering these arguments, it would follow that the characteristics of the sonnets are far more compatible with those of a creative piece based on real events, rather than an exclusively fictional one.

Sharing the same opinion as Schiffer and Bell, Don Paterson argues that particular terms used by critics throughout the years resulted in a diversion of the readers' attention from the autobiographical characteristics present in the sonnets. One of these devices would be, for example, the habit of referring to the addressee of sonnets 1 to 126 not as "the young man," but as "the Fair Youth," and that of referring to the voice in the poems as "the poet," instead of as William Shakespeare:

The young man is referred to by commentators as "the Fair Youth" – one of those sly euphemisms that aestheticises WS's relationship [...] Even more sinister is the convention of reducing WS to the status of cast-member, referring to the author of the Sonnets not as Shakespeare but as "the poet" – in the desperate attempt that these screamingly autobiographical poems might be constructed as a fiction or a dramatic monologue (Paterson xiv).

Assuming that Shakespeare was indeed describing actual facts leads to the basis for a reconsideration of the Young Man and, most importantly, the Dark Lady. One of the main difficulties we face in the task of attributing an identity to the latter is the fact that we possess such little information about her. Indeed, as Dutton says, "[t]he lady was dark, musical and married – this is the sum of our direct information" (Dutton 126). The characteristic of darkness should not, as we have seen, be taken literally, but as a connection with the mentioned "Masque of Blackness" by Jonson, in which Lady Mary Wroth participated. The possession of a talent for music can also be seen as a characteristic that both Wroth and the Dark Lady of the sonnets share, since, as of an early age, the former had got used to being praised for her musicality.

Moreover, the most curious characteristic that the character shares with Lady Mary Wroth is her civil status. Indeed, the censure which is targeted at the Dark Lady in the sonnets is explained by the fact that, in spite of being married, she is romantically involved with another man other than her husband, also known as the Young Man. This is an aspect that, as Gibson suggested in his article, also connects Wroth with the Dark Lady. Besides possessing historical evidence which has informed us of the fact that Wroth was romantically involved with her cousin, William Herbert, we also have reason to believe that her marriage was an unhappy one from the beginning. Indeed, in a letter addressed by Lady Mary Wroth's father to his wife, only two weeks after her wedding, Sir Robert refers to an embarrassing secret which involves the couple and that must, by no means, be discovered. In the letter, Wroth's father also mentions the conversation in which Robert Wroth expressed his discontentment towards his wife, concluding that the reason why secrecy must be maintained is that his enemies "would be very glad for such an occasion to make themselves merry at [...] [him]" (Waller 114).

Even though critics have been torn between seeing this “secret” as the non-consummation of the Wroths’ marriage and as the discovery of an attachment between the two cousins, it can be assumed that it refers to both. In fact, as Waller explains, demographic studies on the period show that there was an average of sixteen months from a wedding until the birth of the first child (106). In Lady Mary Wroth’s case, however, it not only took ten years for the first child to be born, but said birth did not happen until a month before Robert Wroth who – as Waller affirms – “presumably was the father” died (119). Waller makes matters even more complicated and suggests that, even though Wroth’s two illegitimate children who were born after her husband had passed away, were always assumed to have been fathered by Herbert, it is impossible to know whether the pregnancies were “the eventual result of a long relationship with Pembroke [...] or of stray encounters with a close and intimate relation” (125).

In spite of this, William Herbert played, undeniably, a very important part in Lady Mary Wroth’s life. That, together with the fact that he is widely believed to be the Young Man in *The Sonnets*, consequently makes Wroth an adequate contender for the figure of the Dark Lady. Where the Young Man is concerned all the – however limited – information we possess about him coincides with Herbert. First of all, as Martin argues, “there is no doubt what sort of person he is: young, beautiful, narcissistic and in some sense an aristocrat, someone with the attitudes, likeable or not, of those that have power” (Martin 4). In addition, the relationship between the Dark Lady and the Young Man which is described in the sonnets, “fits what is known of Pembroke’s sexual habits – promiscuous with women, though adverse to marriage” (Dutton 133). Furthermore, the fact that he grew up in “a rich tradition of literary patronage” and was “wealthy enough to patronise more writers than anyone else of his generation” (133) also makes it very likely not only that he was acquainted with Shakespeare, but that he worked as his patron, which would entitle him formally to the famous dedication in *The Sonnets*.

Nevertheless, the reasons which make the existence of a triangle between Wroth, Herbert and Shakespeare likely can be found in the sonnets themselves. In sonnet 133, for example – which Paterson describes in the following extract – Shakespeare declares that the Dark Lady, not satisfied with having conquered his heart, has also done the same with that of his friend, the Young Man:

The DL has enslaved his “sweet’st friend”... – and we’re surely not meant to doubt who that is. (...) we might figure the DL as someone closer to Mr. WH’s noble circle. (Paterson 135)

These connections seem most conclusive in sonnet 135 (Shakespeare 137). In this poem, Shakespeare plays with the multiple meanings of the word “will,” as he tries to convince the Dark Lady to become romantically involved

with him “by sheer persistence” (Paterson 409). In this attempt at persuading the Dark Lady, “will” is inclusively used with the meaning of both the male and the female sexual organs: “Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious/ Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?” (ll. 5-6); “thou hast thy Will,/ And Will to boot, and Will in over-plus;” “So thou, being rich in Will, add to thy Will/One will of mine” (ll. 11-12). As Paterson is quick to realise, this implies that “there’s more than one lover called Will here” (Paterson 410). This would indicate, therefore, that the Dark Lady is involved with a man who is also called Will, and who could have been William Herbert.

What has been largely misinterpreted in criticism, however, is the nature of the relationship between Shakespeare and the Dark Lady. Indeed, in sonnet 135, Shakespeare argues that, as the Dark Lady is already romantically involved with another man – also called Will – she might as well become involved with Shakespeare too. The plural used in sonnet 136 (“full of wills” – ll. 6), together with the verse “Among a number one is reckoned none” (ll. 8) constitutes another argument that he uses in his persuasion, as it insinuates that she will probably take on other lovers, which would make him only one more.

It is sonnets like these which have been seen as evidence of the Dark Lady’s promiscuity and led critics to postulate that “not only the poet, but the youth as well, has become involved with the mistress” (Martin 81). Ignoring the unfavourable portrayal of the Dark Lady, some critics have even claimed that the addressee of sonnets 127 to 152 would have been a prostitute, believing the woman in the sonnets to be “sexually voracious” (Bell 298). As Ilona Bell explains, if the Dark Lady really was the promiscuous woman so many believe her to be, she might have yielded to Shakespeare’s persuasion. She, however, does not, as “the only explicit reference to her multiple lovers is a question about her future behaviour: ‘Shall will in others seem right gracious?’” (298.) If the “frenzy of hyperbolic requests” (298) present in some of the Dark Lady Sonnets, especially numbers 135 and 136, reveals anything, it is the fact that, in spite of these attempts, the addressee of the sonnets still refuses to yield to Shakespeare’s persuasion. Indeed, as Bell argues: “Angry that she still won’t sleep with him, and jealous of her hold on the [Young] man’s attentions, Shakespeare imagines that she is available to anyone and everyone – everyone but himself, that is” (299). Even though the voice of the Dark Lady is largely absent from the poems, there is an instance in which we hear it: when she declares “that she is made of truth” and that Shakespeare’s “fantasies about her promiscuity are just that, fantasies” (299). Could this contestatory defence of her constancy to the Young Man, after being accused of having multiple lovers, mirror the one expressed by Wroth’s Pamphilia? Do we find, as Jonathan Gibson pertinently asked, the Dark Lady writing back in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*?

Wroth wrote *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus* in such a way that we cannot help but assume that there was somewhat of an autobiographical intention

behind it. First of all, Wroth signed "Pamphilia" at the end of the first and fourth series of the sonnet sequence. This, combined with the fact that Pamphilia is portrayed, in the prose romance, *Urania*, as a "dedicated and prolific writer" (Roberts 43) made Wroth's contemporaries assume that the character of Pamphilia was autobiographical. Furthermore, it becomes evident who Amphilanthus is supposed to represent as, in *Urania*, he is described as being Pamphilia's first cousin. Considering this in context of a poem recited by Amphilanthus in *Urania* which appears in four different manuscripts at the British Library, three of them being specifically attributed to Pembroke (44), the evidence becomes very strong indeed.

What must be kept in mind, in spite of this, is that there is a possibility that not all the poems in *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus* were meant for or written about Herbert. If Herbert really is Amphilanthus, one would expect his poems to also work according to the tradition of the answer poem which, as Waller admits, they do not. Indeed, according to him, "the connections between the two cousin's poems are generic rather than specific" (Waller 201). However, as Waller mentions, the puns on the name "Will" are "too many to be coincidental" (127), which might be seen as an indicator that they all refer to Herbert.

It is in no other than Lady Mary Wroth's poems that we find a possible solution to this enigma. Indeed, sonnet 10, third series (Roberts 132) contains a particularly interesting pun with the name "Will": "Yett soe as neither will in least mistrust" (ll. 7). This verse insinuates a connection to the latter's "So thou, being rich in Will, add to thy Will/One will of mine" (ll. 11-12). If, as the word play indicates, Wroth is talking about two men, both named Will, in which she must lay her trust upon, then we can reasonably put Shakespeare forward as a candidate for the second Will.

The similarities between Shakespeare's and Wroth's poems are certainly significant. First of all, the puns with the name "Will" in Wroth's sonnets are, indeed, as Waller puts it, "too many to be coincidental" (Waller 127). Sonnet 3, first series (Roberts 86), which "appears to be an invitation to the game of love" (Paulissen 182) is an apt example of this. Even though the verse which contains the line is "Will you your servant leave?" – as Paulissen explains – the word order of the line suggests "a mental comma after the word 'Will,' which would change the verb into a personal salutation" (182). The message that would be hidden in this verse is, therefore, "Will, you your servant leave." Another playful sonnet in which an invitation to an involvement in a romantic relationship is apparently present in number 26, first series, where the verse "Butt if you will bee kind, and just indeed,/Send me your hartt" (ll. 9-10) also seems to be addressed to someone named "Will."

The same principle applies this time to a more grave sonnet, number 45, first series (Roberts 113), in which the role of the speaker is taken on by a woman driven mad by love. In line 5, the verse "will you still my mischiefs more augment?" also calls for a comma after "will," as well as a capital "W,"

which would turn it into “Will, you still my mischiefs more augment” (ll. 5). A more straightforward pun is also contained in verse 9: “Well then I see noe way butt this will fright” (ll. 9), in which the only thing lacking is a capital “W” that would, perhaps too explicitly for the purpose of the poet, turn the word “will” into a proper noun.

The sonnet in which this pun is most prominently used, however, is number 48, first series (Roberts 115), in which the feeling of being in love is compared to that of being consumed by flames. As Paulissen affirms, “the reader cannot deny the presence of the rhetorical device of [...] word play” in the declaration that “she will please ‘Will’” (Paulissen 196) hidden in the sixth verse: “To use that part to theyr best pleasing will” (ll. 6). Another pun also seems to be present in the last verse of the sonnet, which “affirms the poet’s vow to endure the flames until she is turned to ashes” (Paulissen 193): “Yett love I will till I butt ashes prove” (ll. 14). Furthermore, the poem undoubtedly contains strong, “sensuous and erotic” (Paulissen 192) imagery related to fire that can easily be associated with the physical, passionate side of love, which is present not only in quite a few of Lady Mary Wroth’s sonnets, but also in Shakespeare’s poems. In this particular one, Wroth’s perspective is quite positive, since the use of the comparative form (“greater,” “purer,” “brighter” – Roberts 115) seems to suggest, as Paulissen argues, “that being burned in the flames of love is better than not being involved in love at all” (Paulissen 194).

The same, however, is not the case in all of Wroth’s poems. Indeed, as in Shakespeare, her sonnets are filled with “the polarities between virtuous and illicit love, between chaste friendship and adulterous alliances” (Paulissen 35), and they both address questions such as whether a form of purely spiritual and Platonic love is possible without lust and physical passion. The tension in both these poets’ sonnets is, therefore, created “by the inherent possibility of a fall from grace, though the ideal goal of purity remain constant” (35). This is especially clear in Shakespeare’s number 129 (Shakespeare 131), which condemns lust:

Th’ expense of spirit in a waste of shame  
Is lust in action, and till action lust  
Is perjured, murd’urous, bloody, full of blame (ll. 1-3).

In the same way, Lady Mary Wroth’s sonnet 9, third series (Roberts 132), presents lust as something wicked which should be fought, as it is nothing but a cause for shame:

If lust be counted love t’is faulcely nam’d  
By wikednes a fayer gloss to sett  
Upon that vice, which els makes men asham’d  
In the owen frase to warrant butt begett (ll. 11-12).

In sonnet 4, third series (129), Lady Mary Wroth presents an alternative to this form of love by defending a purer and more rational sort, maintained by the ideal of constancy:

And bee in his brave court a gloriouse light,  
Shine in the eyes of faith, and constancie...  
Never to slack till earth noe stars can see  
Till Sunn, and Moone doe leabe to us dark night  
And second Chaose once againe doe free  
Us, and the world from all devisions spite (ll. 1-2; 5-8).

However, the more intriguing aspect in this poem is that, while vowing to be constant to her lover by using the image of chaos coming at the end of the world, Wroth's verses echo those in which Shakespeare's Othello vows to Desdemona, "When I love thee not, Chaos come again" (Paulissen 100).

After analysing these similarities between the works of the two poets, it can be assumed that – as Paulissen declares – Wroth is "representative of poets of her era [such as Shakespeare,] in that she sought the reconciliation of physical and spiritual love" (116). Indeed, in spite of being accompanied by feelings of guilt, the "fall from grace" (35) into the physical, lustful side of love that characterises the experience of both poets is presented in such a way that it becomes difficult not to consider it inevitable. One can be persuaded to wonder whether both Shakespeare and Wroth did not view it as such.

### 3. A Lover's Complaint

Even though the Young Man in Shakespeare's Sonnets is always seen as a righteous figure who represents pure love, and the Dark Lady as someone evil who represents the lustful side of love, this does not apply to all of the sonnets. As a matter of fact, "Shakespeare's idealised view of the man becomes increasingly fraught and complicated [...] as unfolding events cast shadows over his 'bright' image" (Bell 293). In sonnet 144 (Shakespeare 146), for example, Shakespeare appears to suspect that the man and the woman have traded places: "I guess one angel in another's hell/Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,/Till my bad angel fire my good one out" (ll. 14).

This suspicion turns into certainty in sonnet 147 (Shakespeare 149) and Shakespeare declares: "For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,/Who art as black as hell, as dark as night" (ll. 13-14). As the "critiques of the dark lady are so deeply entrenched that they permeate annotations and interpretations, even when the [...] sonnet being explained makes no such claims" (Bell 294), no one before Ilona Bell had considered that this sonnet might have been addressed to the Young Man and not to her. In fact, and as Bell explains, after we are alerted to the possibility that this sonnet might be about the man, suddenly it becomes clear that the person who is described as "bright"

throughout the poems is not the Dark Lady, whose “eyes are nothing like the sun” (ll. 1) and who “makes[s] me give the lie to my true sight,/And swear thy brightness doth not grace the day,” (ll. 3-4) but the man, whom Shakespeare compares to a summer’s day in sonnet 18 (Bell 304).

What was it, then, that brought upon this discovery that seems to overturn everything Shakespeare once believed in? The answer lies in sonnet 152 (Shakespeare 154), where the addressee of the sonnets is accused of breaking a bed-vow (“In act thy bed-vow broke” – ll. 3). In order to understand this accusation, however, it is imperative to know the meaning behind the word “bed-vow”:

According to the law, a promise to marry, followed by an oath made freely by both parties, constituted a legally binding betrothal, or marriage contract. Such an espousal *de futuro* could not be broken, except by mutual consent or for a “just” reason stipulated by law [...] After betrothal, most couples waited to solemnize their marriage in church [...] Yet many couples [...] began sleeping together once they were fast betrothed, and for good reason: an espousal, or promise to marry, even if made in the future tense [...] comprised a legally binding common-law marriage when sealed by intercourse (Bell 305).

Taking in consideration what we know about this social practise, it becomes “all but certain” that the Young Man and the Dark Lady made and then broke a bed-vow (305). As Bell explains, the sonnet only makes sense if the man is the one accused of breaking the bed-vow, evident in the following verses:

And all my honest faith in thee is lost.  
For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness,  
Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy (ll. 8-10).

It becomes clear, therefore, that the addressee could not be the Dark Lady, as the sonnets in which she is described “contain no such oaths” (Bell 306). In fact, it is the Young Man who has been called “kind” by Shakespeare in verses such as the following from sonnet 134 (Shakespeare 136): “For thou art covetous and he is kind” (ll. 6). Furthermore, Shakespeare could never have lost his confidence in the Dark Lady, as he always mistrusted her: “When my love swears that she is made of truth,/ [...] I know she lies” (140; ll. 1).

Since the bed-vow constituted a binding contract, the Young Man would have needed a convincing excuse to break it. Once again, the missing pieces of information can be found in the sonnet sequence. In sonnet 48 (50), Shakespeare starts by saying that he was “careful” to keep the sonnets locked up, so that they “might unused stay/From hands of falsehood” (ll. 3-4). However, the Young Man asks Shakespeare for the sonnets and, after being trusted with them, he allows them to be stolen:

But thou, to whom my jewels trifles are,  
Most worthy of comfort, now my greatest grief,  
Thou best of dearest, and mine only care,  
Art left the prey of every vulgar thief (ll. 5-8).

At this point, one must remember that sonnets 138 and 144 were printed in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599. In his attempt to convince the Dark Lady to become involved with him, Shakespeare had threatened to spread rumours about her if she would not give in to his will ("For if I should despair I should grow mad,/ And in my madness might speak ill of thee" - ll. 9-10). According to him, the rumours would be believed as "this ill-wresting world is grown so bad,/ Mad sland'ers by mad ears believed be" (ll. 11-12). As Bell explains, these 'mad sland'ers' have indeed been believed, "for [...] critics continue to assume that the lady was a sexually voracious [...] woman, perhaps even a whore [...] who slept with the sonnet speaker, the man, and countless others" (Bell 301). If, as the sonnets seem to indicate, the Young Man arranged for the sonnets to be published, so that the Dark Lady would be believed to be involved with other men and that he would have a reason to "escape his moral and legal obligations to her" (308), then that would indeed prove him to be a much worse human being than Shakespeare thought him to be.

Whilst analysing this description of the Young Man, it is noticeable that it matches what we know of William Herbert. Indeed, Herbert is continuously described by his biographers as having been promiscuous with women. His "illicit affair with the courtier Mary Fitton, who bore his child," (Roberts 24) and with whom he refused to marry, in spite of admitting paternity, having gone to prison for it, is nothing if not representative of his behaviour towards women. One might be compelled to wonder, therefore, whether history did not repeat itself with Lady Mary Wroth.

If we cut to *A Lover's Complaint*, as Bell suggests we do, we find a woman telling the story of how she was seduced and then abandoned "to a life of dishonor" by a man who had pledged a "strong-bonded oath" to her (Bell 309). This man who appeals "to sexes both" (Bell 432), "bears an uncanny and irrefutable resemblance" (309) to the Young Man of the sonnets. *A Lover's Complaint* can be seen, therefore, as a "public apology" (309) on behalf of Shakespeare, to the Dark Lady (Wroth), for having been an – however unconscious – accomplice in the Young Man's (William Herbert's) treacherous plans. If this is true, then we find a justification for so many aspects about this work which have puzzled the critics throughout the years, such as its circularity and "the sense that it never seems to go anywhere, to change or achieve anything" (436).

Indeed, instead of repenting, the abandoned woman, "in a way [that] has seemed so baffling to many, [...] maintains that she would do it all again, go through the same painful experience any number of times" (435). Unlike more conventional examples of the complaint tradition, *A Lover's Complaint*

“is bound by no didacticism and ‘promulgates no forthright moral,’ lacking an ending that would “wind up the story, redeem the wrong done, and satisfy readerly expectations” (436). This would make sense, however, if this particular complaint served a different purpose. The reason why it lacks a happy ending would be, therefore, that one did not actually take place in the life of the woman whose story is being told.

This disillusionment in love is another aspect which links the woman in *A Lover's Complaint* with Lady Mary Wroth. Indeed, in the fourth series of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Wroth speaks as one “disappointed, or injured, in the game of love,” as someone who “at last understands the ways of the world” and has become more stoic (Paulissen 204). In sonnet 9, 4 series (Roberts 142), the last of the printed version, Wroth puts her muse to rest and vows not to write more love poems but, instead, to become dedicated to “redeeming herself and to elevating her thoughts in the direction of [i]deal love” (Paulissen 142). The poetess’ resignation in this farewell to poetry is evident, especially in the verses in which she tells her muse the following: “Write you noe more, butt lett thes phant’sies move/Some other harts, wake nott to new unrest” (ll. 3-4).

Lady Mary Wroth’s sequence in the printed version ends, therefore, with the vow to live, from then on, “a quiet life where she can contemplate only heavenly love” (Paulissen 209). However, the poetess also makes it extremely hard for us readers to ignore the possible pun on the name “will” contained in one of the verses of the last sonnet: “Never will remove” (ll. 8).

The information we possess seems to indicate that, at the end of their sonnet sequences, Wroth and Shakespeare wrote and expressed disappointment over the same man, William Herbert. If, as *The Sonnets* combined with historical facts appear to show, Herbert was Shakespeare’s Young Man, then the chances that Wroth was the famous Dark Lady are substantial. As difficult as it is for us to guess the kind of relationship that was established between these three people, we can safely assert where they met: at Court, in a literary coterie, in which they shared their work and wrote together.

The fact that Wroth wrote in a context such as this is proof against many misconceptions and erroneous ideas about early modern women writers that Ezell refuted in *Writing Women's Literary History*. Not only did Lady Mary Wroth write alongside men, she also had her literary undertakings encouraged and praised by them. Such a positive reaction was a consequence, not merely of the literary history of her family and her status in society, but chiefly resulting from her own merit and talent as a writer.

It is precisely the fact that such fallacious ideas still exist in the present that warrant counteracting. It is imperative, therefore, not only to continue to analyse these sonnets, but also to find out more about the context in which they were written. This aspect cannot be forgotten, as it is the fact that these

poems were, in all likelihood, based on real events and meant only for a restricted group of people that render them so cryptic in the first place.

As ascertained in this paper, there are too many similarities between the two sonnet sequences, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and *The Sonnets*, to be ignored. Indeed, it is at least safe to assume that these two authors influenced each other's literary composition in one way or another. Therefore, further comparative studies between the two are certainly worth conducting. As for the true relationships between Lady Mary Wroth and William Shakespeare, however, maybe we are – as Shakespeare himself said – meant to “ne'er know, but live in doubt” (ll. 13).

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