

Reading Mary Wroth

REPRESENTING ALTERNATIVES
IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND



Edited by
Naomi J. Miller and Gary Waller

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*To our sons, Isaiah and Philip,
whose growth, from conception to birth,
first steps to first words,
has kept pace with the evolution
of this project.*

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Abbreviations

- Brennan *Lady Mary Wroth's Love's Victory*. Ed. Michael G. Brennan. London: The Roxburghe Club, 1988.
- CSP *Calendar of State Papers*
- HMC *Historical Manuscripts Commission*
- Roberts *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*. Ed. Josephine A. Roberts. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983.
- Waller *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. Ed. Gary Waller. Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1977.

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from *Urania* are cited by page number from *The Countesse of Mountgomerie's Urania* (London 1621) and by book and folio number from *The Secound Part of the Countess of Montgomerys Urania* (Newberry Library Case MS fY 1565. W 95).

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Introduction: Reading as Re-Vision

Naomi J. Miller and Gary Waller

The career of Mary Wroth, born Mary Sidney (c. 1587–1653), exemplifies the complex limitations and possibilities which faced a woman determined to achieve some significant degree of agency within a seemingly irresistible patriarchal family and social formation. Her life provides fascinating material for the history of gender assignment and gender politics, while her writings are important contributions to both the literature of early modern England and the rapidly developing story of women's writing in English. Wroth was perhaps the most accomplished woman writer in English before Aphra Behn (who may have been her granddaughter)¹: she wrote the first Petrarchan sequence in English by a woman, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*; one of the first plays by a woman, *Love's Victory* (only recently published for the first time); and a long and intriguing prose romance, *The Countesse of Mountgomerie's Urania* (first part published in 1621, with a two-volume critical edition of the complete work currently underway). In the past decade these writings, most particularly *Urania* and *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, have attracted increasing critical attention. The very range of genres represented by Wroth's works provides an unusual opportunity to examine not simply one surviving text by a woman of her time but a group of texts whose very diversity constitutes a challenge to the previous marginalization of women by many teachers and critics of Renaissance literature.

When Adrienne Rich asserted, in 1971, that “re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival,” she was discussing the awakening consciousness of twentieth-century women writers.² Two decades later, an

established tradition of feminist scholarship—particularly well represented in recent collections of essays edited by Margaret Hannay, Mary Beth Rose, Margaret Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy Vickers, and Anne Haselkorn and Betty Travitsky—has documented the existence of women writers in periods such as the Renaissance, when their silence, if not absence, had previously been taken for granted.³ At the same time, a number of feminist critics have started to focus on more than the obvious oppression and victimization suffered by many early women writers (and noted by Rich in her essay), identifying their “acts of survival,” the enabling strategies and legacies that can be identified in their works. While the facts of female subordination and the effects of gender hierarchy must not be underestimated, the significance of women as subjects generating writing and other actions must henceforth shape the analysis of any chapter in cultural history.

In the past decade or so, the early modern period in particular has been the site of multiple re-visions of cultural history and literary theory which have made possible the bringing together of the present collection of essays on Mary Wroth. Since the 1970s, the rediscovery of previously neglected writings of women from the early modern period has produced a major rewriting of the canon—and, perhaps even more usefully, helped call into question the ideological underpinnings of canonicity altogether. Henceforth, literary histories of early modern England will not be able to ignore the writings of Mary Sidney, Elizabeth I, Aemilia Lanyer, Elizabeth Cary, Mary Wroth, Anne Clifford, or the many other women, both well and lesser known, of the period. At the same time, the exciting and frequently contradictory impact of various feminisms, poststructuralisms, new historicisms, and other approaches to the production of texts has dramatically revised the ways we read. While the essays on Mary Wroth collected here do not articulate a shared theoretical position, inevitably they are written and should be read against the background of the theoretical rethinking that has made both literary studies, and early modern studies in particular, such exciting fields.

Yet even when we consider the gratifying examples of closer critical attention to women writers like Wroth, it becomes necessary to recognize that the enormous advances in critical awareness which have recently swept the field of early modern studies must not be allowed

to generate a false sense of complacency. For all the recent attention to women writers, not one of the five major collections of critical essays concerned with early modern women which appeared in the second half of the 1980s included an essay on Mary Wroth.⁴ Perhaps of even more concern, for teachers of the Renaissance, is the fact that the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English*, edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, does not even mention Wroth, in spite of the notable variety and length of the works to her name.⁵ In order to rewrite the canon, it is important to be able to read women writers as presences, not just absences, to read texts, not just contexts.

Likewise on the theoretical front, notwithstanding the appearance of some important collections of feminist essays on the early modern period, many recent collections of critical essays have tended to remain focused both upon traditional male-authored works and upon masculine preoccupations with political power in both literary and cultural texts of the period. As Carol Thomas Neely has observed, the effect of many of the new theoretical approaches has been paradoxically to further oppress women, repress sexuality, and subordinate gender issues.⁶ Stephen Greenblatt's collection, *Representing the English Renaissance*, for instance, reinscribes "the" Renaissance in wholly male terms through its failure to consider any female-authored texts, while John Drakakis's collection, *Alternative Shakespeares*, follows a primarily "cult-historicist" line of interpretation (to use Neely's term), dismissing other, less "radical" approaches as not sufficiently "alternative."⁷ Contributors to the present volume, by contrast, offer truly alternative interpretations to one another, drawing from feminist and psychoanalytic as well as various new historicist perspectives, and demonstrating, in particular, an awareness of alternative feminisms instead of attempting to inscribe a single feminist position.

The essays suggest how Mary Wroth, herself, engaged in representing alternatives to patriarchal Renaissance positions in her approach to gender and genre, to constructions of subjectivity and sexual difference. In her time, the primary roles of women in writing were still as figures in a discourse produced by men. Where women were able to write (and, especially, to publish), both external oppositions and internal tensions mark their prefaces and dedications—on the one hand, apologies for intervening in an activity forbidden to or at least deemed

unsuitable for women; on the other hand, satisfaction that women were asserting themselves in an activity purported to be more natural to men. Wroth is one of the first woman writers in English who clearly saw herself as having the vocation of a writer, and in whose work a habitually submerged female discourse starts to emerge when self-conscious resistance to patriarchy finds written expression.

Since Mary Wroth's life is examined, from very different viewpoints, in the opening essays by Margaret Hannay and Gary Waller, here it is necessary only to provide the briefest biographical outline. She was born probably in 1587, the first child of Robert Sidney, later Viscount de L'Isle and Earl of Leicester. Thus she was born into a family prominent in politics and letters. Its most distinguished member, Philip Sidney, was celebrated (and mythologized) by successive generations as the ideal Renaissance courtier, a mystification of his contradictory and fascinating career, and other members of the family were almost as intriguing. Philip's father, Henry, was one of Queen Elizabeth's most dedicated public servants, not least for the thankless task of upholding the queen's parsimonious and often brutal Irish policy; his mother, Mary, likewise dedicated herself to the public duties of an aspiring court family, damaging her health while nursing the queen through an attack of smallpox. Philip's younger brother Robert, Mary Wroth's father, was an ambitious but anxious politician and (perhaps partly as a consequence) a fine poet whose writings record the strains of being a courtier in the increasingly paranoid court of the aging Elizabeth. Philip's sister, Mary, Countess of Pembroke, the mother of William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, was a much celebrated patroness and literary figure. As Margaret Hannay and Jeff Masten note in their essays, the title page of Wroth's *Urania* calls attention simultaneously to her literary and familial connections in naming her "Daughter to the right Noble Robert Earle of Leicester. And Neece to the ever famous, and renowned Sir Phillips Sidney knight. And to the most exelent Lady Mary Countesse of Pembroke late deceased."

Mary Wroth's childhood was spent at the family home, Penshurst Place, in Kent, with frequent visits to the Low Countries, where her father had charge of the English troops, and London, where the Sidneys usually stayed at the Earl of Pembroke's London residence, Baynards Castle. In the late years of Elizabeth's reign she came to court, and in