University of Missouri

A Symphony of Suffering

Exploring Masochistic Love in Lady Mary Wroth's 'Urania'

\

Nina Schmolzi

English 4106: Medieval and Renaissance Romance

Lee Manion

Fall 2023

The intricate and semi-repetitive narrative structure of Lady Mary Wroth's Urania serves as a compelling lens through which readers can explore the multifaceted dimensions of love, desire, and the complexities of human emotions. This essay delves into the many contrasting characters and approaches to love, unraveling their roles as metaphors for Wroth's internal struggle over her feelings for an unconstant lover, her cousin William Herbert. While characters such as Urania and Antissia embody the rational self-preservation of the mind, Pamphilia personifies the heart's relentless predisposition to suffering, creating a dichotomy that explores the dangers and pains associated with unfaithful lovers and demonstrates that although the head may advise us to move on, the heart is unwaveringly Love's prisoner. Through these character explorations, Wroth argues that love is inherently painful and those who stay constant to unfaithful lovers are masochistic.

Despite her association with Pamphilia, "Urania's happy ending … and her place in the romance's title indicate that her moderate view of love and loyalty is more representative of Wroth's own vision of sovereignty than Pamphilia's extravagant defense of unswerving devotion" (Sanchez 468). This identification with the unlucky-in-love protagonist serves to make Urania a sort of cautionary tale about loving an unfaithful one as Wroth did her cousin William Herbert, one in which she "shows that constant women are subject to never-ending sufferings since men do not feel qualms about their inconstancy" (Ko 166).

Urania urges Pamphilia against staying true to an unconstant lover despite it being her own brother she warns against. This conversation is reflective of Wroth's own inner dialogue, reconciling her rational self against her loving heart. Pamphilia seems powerless against Love, saying: "I can never leave my master [Love] … but still maintain a virtuous constancy" (Wroth 154) but accepts it as a virtue– Urania counters that it is not, and can actually be a vice, warning

her that “this virtue has its limits” (Wroth 154). This sentiment encapsulates the internal conflict Wroth likely experienced when torn between the rationality of protecting her heart and the profound, often uncontrollable, emotions associated with love. Pamphilia’s conflicting narrative, feeling both trapped by love yet consenting to remain so, speaks to how the pain of love is not deterrent enough against its strength. Pamphilia embodies the extremes of love, demonstrating the dangers associated with unbridled emotional commitment. Her unwavering loyalty to an unconstant lover echoes Wroth's caution against allowing love to become an all-consuming force, which in such situations will only cause pain.

Pamphilia's masochism and self-martyrdom raise questions about agency and autonomy in relationships. While she willingly embraces the role of the submissive lover, it prompts readers to consider the extent to which she is in control of her destiny, as medieval literature is rife with women who are unlucky-in-love yet do not have the resources to secure a better option. Thus, Pamphilia may be read by some as a tragic woman of the time who is victimized by her lover’s unfaithfulness. However, Pamphilia chooses to be constant time and time again, despite the heartache and insistence of her friends to move on, and even despite her admittance that it would be better for herself to let go. Furthermore, as a queen, Pamphilia has the power to evade any relational obligation, especially considering she is not married or even betrothed to Amphilanthus. Her obsessive love “is not a passive response to his affection for herself, but her free choice to love him under any circumstances” (Ko 175-6). Pamphilia chooses constancy because she believes it is tantamount to true love, and believes that revoking her love when it is not returned is selfish, insisting she can never leave her master, Love, “but still maintain a virtuous constancy” despite admitting Amphilanthus despises her (Wroth 154). This implies an acceptance of the pains of love as an integral part of a deeper, more authentic connection. When

Urania, Steriamus, and company fall into the ocean, they are cured of “the most burdensome tormenting affliction that souls can know, love” (Wroth 106). This is the same way Antissia is relieved of her love for Amphilanthus. It is notable that Wroth does not demonstrate characters moving on naturally or through their own strength, they must rely on external forces. The narrator’s perspective here points towards Wroth’s views on love, yet the narrator’s defense of Amphilanthus shows Wroth’s inner conflict on the matter of her own unfaithful lover. So when this same solution is offered to Pamphilia, a stand-in for Wroth herself, she declines and insists that “[t]o leave him for being false would show [her] love was not for his sake but for [her] own” (Wroth 153). Wroth, through Pamphilia, seems to be grappling with the notion that enduring the tribulations of love might be an intrinsic aspect of genuine, selfless affection.

Pamphilia chooses not to scorn Amphilanthus for his unfaithfulness, fearful that it would reflect poorly on him. However, the unfortunate reality is that men’s infidelity was an accepted part of marriage at the time, in sharp contrast with women’s infidelity, and even had Pamphilia tried to mar his reputation, she would have been unable. This is demonstrated by Antissia, who “studied ways how to harm [Amphilanthus]” after being betrayed by him, and yet Pamphilia still loves him even after his duplicity is put on display for her in the Hell of Deceit. Ironically, Pamphilia’s constancy renders her “helpless and impotent” when Amphilanthus is held captive by Musalina in the Hell of Deceit (Ko 173). Her love makes her ineffectual not only in matters directly concerning Amphilanthus but also interferes with her governing abilities and threatens her life (Wroth 151). Rather, Pamphilia seems to relish Amphilanthus’s infidelity in a pseudo-masochistic sense, consistently absolving Amphilanthus of blame and choosing to persist in love, even when offered an opportunity to move on through the cleansing waters.

Some may argue that Pamphilia is an active agent in her masochism, that it is an act of empowerment, not victimhood. However, I posit her masochism enables Amphilanthus's infidelity and exposes other women to the potential harm of his unfaithful behavior. While suffering in love may be her idea of a good time, she fails as a queen and as a friend to show up for the women around her, such as Antissia, who she knows does not derive the same pleasure from Amphilanthus's antics. From Wroth's standpoint, writing this character and depicting her constancy as a virtue sends a message that women should be passive and lenient towards their lovers and accommodate their whims. Considering the social landscape of the period, I find it difficult to call Pamphilia's behavior empowering.

When Pamphilia is in the depths of her hurt, she encounters Alarina, who tells her story of being cleansed of love, saying, "I grew free, and free from love to which I late was slave. Then finding this true virtue in myself and my poor self returned to me again, I did embrace it in the same true sort that love held me, and so we did agree. I love myself; myself now loveth me" (Wroth 103). This story can be compared to Urania, who is heartbroken by the inconstancy of her former lover Steriamus and is able to move on following her "death in appearance", and fulfills Melissea's prophecy that she would fall in love with one "as great and good as [Steriamus]", and one that stays faithful to her (Wroth 88-9).

After hearing Alarina's story and proclamation of self-love's precedence over unrequited, unconstant– or even generally romantic– love, Pamphilia, speaking to herself, says: "When all this is said, and that the truest knowledge tells me these are true, my wounded heart with bleeding doth profess vassalage to the great and powerful might of Love. I am a prisoner" (Wroth 105). Pamphilia's willingness to sustain her painful and unfulfilling love "demonstrates that her self-imposed identity as a martyr to love has become its own perverse reward" (Sanchez

465). Indeed, she finds righteousness, and perhaps pleasure, in martyrdom. Urania's story, with its moderation and eventual resolution, stands as a counterpoint, reinforcing the cautionary element by suggesting that a more measured approach to love can lead to a fulfilling resolution, whereas masochistic tendencies may only perpetuate suffering.

Despite Pamphilia's insistence that she is Love's prisoner, the character of Antissia also makes clear it is possible to break free of its hold. At the beginning of the novel, Antissia is also painfully in love with Amphilanthus and her "life depended on his sight" (Wroth 63). But when Amphilanthus cheats on her she becomes active and attempts to have him murdered. This is in stark contrast to Pamphilia, who consistently excuses Amphilanthus's inconstancy. In the Theater, Pamphilia watches Amphilanthus with Musalina, which hurts her heart, "she poor lady beholding nothing but affliction and making herself the true subject to it" (Wroth 148). This language shows Pamphilia's compliance in her subjugation by Love, and is more evidence of her self-martyrdom. The narrator points out it is Amphilanthus's unkindness causing her such pain, but that "did she not, nor would accuse him" (Wroth 148).

This self-martyrdom is evident in her reaction to Amphilanthus's perceived death, immediately before the Hell of Deceit is discovered. She attempts to die on command and upon her failure asks another knight to help her. But Pamphilia seeks death not out of heartache or to reunite with her lover in Heaven, but because she is fearful of others' reactions to Amphilanthus's death. She worries aloud what other countries will think of her, the "accursed woman, for whose sake the earth's glory and happiness came into it" (Wroth 174). This reaction suggests that Pamphilia's love is more self-serving than she admits in conversation with Urania earlier in the story. As she watches Alarina's wedding to her first love, Pamphilia is shocked and upset that her friend has moved past her pain and reminds herself to "be thou still just and though

but thyself, and so alone to suffer glory in such martyrdom" (Wroth 155). It is possible that the masochism and self-martyrdom allowed by Amphilanthus's inconstancy is more preferred by Pamphilia than his love.

Pamphilia's masochism can be seen as a reflection of the social and cultural norms of the time. In the early 17th century, notions of love and relationships were often intertwined with ideas of submission and sacrifice. Pamphilia's masochistic tendencies may be interpreted as a response to the societal expectations placed upon women, who were often expected to endure hardships in the name of love and duty, much in the same way that Emarė was expected to suffer at the hands of her father's incestuous desire, then be cast out to sea to avoid shaming him. Thus, Pamphilia's insistence to love Amphilanthus despite his infidelity and the availability of a"cure", paired with her self-martyrdom and Love's effect on her, define Wroth's claim that Love, particularly love for an unfaithful lover, is inherently painful and those Lovers who choose it in spite of the pain are masochistic. These attributes reflect Wroth's personal life and her painful and drawn-out relationship with her cousin William Herbert– a relationship mirrored by the cousin-lovers Pamphilia and Amphilanthus– and urge readers to reflect on the consequences of blind loyalty, the virtue of moderation, and the perils of succumbing to the extremes of masochistic love.

Works Cited

Ko, Chanmi. “Mary Wroth’s Critique of Female Constancy: Pamphilia’s Chastity-Like Virtue and Constant Will.” Medieval and Early Modern English Studies, vol. 23, no. 2, Aug. 2015, pp. 161–85. EBSCOhost, https://doi-org.proxy.mul.missouri.edu/10.17054/memes.2015.23.2.161.

Sanchez, Melissa E. “The Politics of Masochism in Mary Wroth’s Urania.” ELH: English Literary History, vol. 74, no. 2, 2007, pp. 449–78. EBSCOhost, https://doi-org.proxy.mul.missouri.edu/10.1353/elh.2007.0019.

Wroth, Mary. The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania (Abridged). Edited by Mary Ellen Lamb, ACMRS (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies), 2011, pp. 39-180.