

Men's Inconstancy in the Prose Fiction of Mary Wroth and María de Zayas

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Mary Wroth and María de Zayas, the first women writers of prose fiction in Britain and Spain respectively, both wrote in the first half of the seventeenth century, but they chose to do it in two different narrative genres. Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621) was a long *roman à clef* with reminiscences of Sidney's *Arcadia*, full of inset stories told by distressed ladies, whining lovers, and valiant knights in the conventional abstract settings of the Elizabethan romance. In contrast, Zayas's *Novelas ejemplares y amorosas* (1637) and *Desengaños amorosos* (1647) were collections of framed short stories in the manner of the *novela cortesana*, in vogue in Spain at the time. Yet the works of these precursory women novelists had many points in common:

- 1) Both writers focused on male inconstancy and defended women's fidelity.
- 2) Both vindicated women's education and their capacity to write valuable literary works.
- 3) Both considered women able to rule countries successfully.
- 4) Both gave free expression to female desire.
- 5) Both created androgynous characters, with which they challenged the neat conventional distinctions between genders.
- 6) Both showed instances of close friendship between women.
- 7) Both argued for women's right to choose their destiny without patriarchal intervention.

This paper attempts to analyse how Wroth and Zayas dealt with the first of these points, men's inconstancy, in their prose fiction.

Talking about *Urania*, Tina Krontiris (1992: 135) has stated that constancy is the central subject of the book. And Carolyn Swift (1990: 155) has also noted that "Queen Pamphilia's constant love for the unfaithful King Amphilanthus is the central story, from which myriad friends and relatives depart and return to narrate mirroring adventures". Thus, most of the female characters in *Urania* are constant, while most of the men are unfaithful. With this Wroth implies that the situation is common in society, something that her narrator and her female characters often explicitly endorse throughout the narrative.

For instance, in the Second Book, when Limena tells Pamphilia the story about the vow-breaking Sicilian man, she comments: "what should we trust, when man the excellentest creature, doth excell in ill? (...) men's words are onely breath, their oathes winde, and vowes water" (Roberts, ed. 1995: 228). A similar ironic remark appears when the narrator says that Pamphilia went to a park to read a book about "the affection of a Lady to a brave Gentleman, who equally loved, but being a man, it was necessary for him to exceede a woman in all things, so much as inconstancie was found fit for him to excell her in, hee left her for a new" (317). A few pages later, in the same Second Book, the narrator tells us that Amphilanthus was glad to see that Antissia still loved him, and comments in brackets "(for what man lives, that glories not in multitudes of women's loves?)" (325).

Further on, in the Fourth Book we can find more examples. The narrator says that the Queen of Bulgaria allowed the Prince of Iambolly to flirt with her, but just gave him hopes, "for he once satisfied, shee was sure to bee left, men desiring but their ends, and with them conclude that love flying to another" (545). And after saying that the Duke of Florence loved the Lady of the Forrest Champion till his death, the narrator remarks that that was "a rare, and seldome knowne thing among men, of his ranke especiallie" (636).

There are certainly some constant men in *Urania*, as there are unfaithful women, but in both cases they are few. Actually, Wroth lets many male characters claim that female inconstancy is the rule, thus reflecting the contemporary debate on women's nature.¹ For instance, in the Second Book, Dolorindus complains about Selinea's choice of another man, and decides to leave the country. He says, "farewell all love to your wayward sex", and calls women light, suspicious, and ignorant. Then Dolorindus and Steriamus start a miniature "dispute, against, and for the worth of women kinde". Steriamus reminds him: "your mother was a woman, and you must be favour'd by an other, to be blessed with brave posterity. Women, why blame you them, the dearest soules, and comforts of our soules?" (189).²

As Krontiris (1992: 133 ff.) has pointed out, Wroth justifies adultery when it is the result of oppression on the part of husbands or fathers. These adulterous women, such as Limena, are still presented as "virtuous" so as to elicit the reader's sympathy and respect. Moreover, Wroth ends up accepting the idea that women can also be unfaithful when their husbands or lovers abandon them. This is mainly seen in the character of Pamphilia, whose name means "all loving" and who takes the idea of constancy to the limit throughout the First Part. She and other female characters who mirror her condition persist in remaining faithful to their first loves even long after the latter have proved inconstant. Their attitude is morally coherent and highly prized by the narrator, but it is not pragmatic at all, because it is self-destructive. Amphilanthus's infidelity causes Pamphilia a great deal of pain, damages her health, and makes her constantly lament his absence or complain about his unfaithfulness. She herself realises that her constancy is a torture, but she cannot help it. Her good friend Urania advises her to

1. For a recent study of this "woman debate", I refer the reader to Purkiss 1992.

2. This counter-argument is reminiscent of Musidorus's in Sidney's *Arcadia* and of Aemilia Lanier in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611).

preserve her health and beauty, and not to idolise love or be his slave. If Amphilanthus, whose very name means "Lover of two", is actually false, she should let him go. According to Urania, this would not suppose a moral flaw in her because those who suffer inconstancy "are free to choose again" (469-70).

But Pamphilia will not change her mind until the end of the unpublished Second Part, when she finally recognises the impossibility of maintaining constancy when surrounded by fickleness. Thus she accepts to marry Rodomandro, King of Tartary. The story is left unfinished and we do not know whether Wroth intended to continue it and, if so, how. But what is clear is that Wroth was quite sceptical about romantic love. The stories included in *Urania* imply that true love can hardly exist due to men's inconstancy, and thus marriage normally leads to misery rather than to happiness. Therefore, *Urania* can be seen as a romance that questions two important elements of romance: idealised love and happy marriage.

Moving now to the Spanish novels of María de Zayas, we must say that the situation is quite similar or even more pessimistic. She completely denies the possibility of a harmonious relationship between men and women due to men's deceitfulness and violence. She most often presents celibacy and monastic retirement as the only ways to escape from the torments of marriage. This attitude of the first Spanish woman novelist is thus a manifest and meaningful deviation from the preceding narrative tradition (cf Foa 1978 and Yllera 1983:19) and, to judge from what we've seen before, Zayas's stance is closer to Wroth's.

In her story titled "La fuerza del amor", included in her *Novelas ejemplares y amorosas*, Laura marries Don Diego but he, "como hombre mudable" (Rincón, ed. 1968: 69), soon leaves her to return to his former lover Nise. Laura complains about men's falseness: "Malhaya la mujer que en ellos cree, pues al cabo hallará el pago de su amor como yo lo hallo. ¿Quién es la necia que desea casarse viendo tantos y tan lastimosos ejemplos?" (77). When at the end Don Diego promises her to mend his ways and begs her to come back to him, she refuses because:

ella estaba desengañada de lo que era el mundo y los hombres y que así no quería más batallar con ellos, porque cuando pensaba lo que había hecho y donde se había visto, no acababa de admirarse; y que supuesto esto, ella se quería entrar en un monasterio, sagrado poderoso, para valerse de las miserias a que las mujeres están sujetas (81).

But Zayas deals with this topic more extensively in *Desengaños amorosos*. In fact the whole collection of framed tales is devoted to that, as the narrator says at the beginning. Lisis organises a party and determines:

en primer lugar, que habían de ser las damas las que novelasen (y en esto acertó con la opinión de los hombres, pues siempre tienen a las mujeres por noveleras); y en segundo, que los que refiriesen fuesen casos verdaderos, y que tuviesen nombre de desengaños (en esto no sé si los satisfizo, porque como ellos procuran siempre engañarlas, sienten mucho se desengañen). Fue la pretensión de Lisis en esto volver por la fama de las mujeres (tan postrada y abatida por su mal juicio, que apenas hay

quien hable bien de ellas). Y como son los hombres los que presiden en todo, jamás cuentan los malos pagos que dan, sino los que les dan; y si bien lo miran, ellos cometen la culpa, y ellas siguen tras su opinión, pensando que aciertan; que lo cierto es que no hubiera malas mujeres sino hubiera malos hombres (Yllera, ed. 1983: 118).

Then the ladies who are present there tell stories to warn women against men's deceitfulness. The first one to speak, Zelima, agrees with Lisis that they must defend women's reputation, "pues ni comedia se representa, ni libro se imprime que no sea todo en ofensa de las mujeres, sin que se reserve ninguna" (124).

Male inconstancy is a recurrent theme in the ladies' stories. For instance, in "Tarde llega el desengaño" Filis states: "en ellos no es durable la voluntad, y por esto se cansan hasta de las propias mujeres, que si no las arrojan de si, como las que no son, no es porque las aman, sino por su opinión" (219). In an interesting essay about Zayas's novels, Juan Goytisolo (1977: 73) argues that they show an incompatibility between love and possession: men love what they cannot possess, because once they obtain the object of desire, love disappears. This is clearly seen in the story "Amar sólo por vencer", as the title itself reflects.

Zayas made it explicit that she had written her *Desengaños amorosos* to counteract the large amount of misogynous literature that was being published in Spain at the time. We have seen that Wroth inserted a brief woman debate in her *Urania*. It seems, then, that she also wanted to contribute to it with her romance. Both writers intended to defend their sex against the accusations of fickleness and wantonness that were levelled against it by many male authors. Thus they joined many women who started to publish tracts to respond to those misogynous attacks.³ As Goreau (1985: 67) has argued, "The repeated attacks on women (...) provided a great source of anger that pushed women to answer in print".

In England, for instance, we have the famous example of Lyly's *Euphues* (1578), where the jilted eponymous hero complains: "Oh the counterfeit love of women! Oh inconstant sex!" (Salzman, ed. 1987: 145). Or the likewise well-known tract by Joseph Swetnam, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women* (1615). At the end of Chapter II, we can read about women:

betwixt their brests is the vale of destruction, and in their beds there is hell, sorrow and repentance. Eagles eat not men till they are dead, but women devoure them alive (...) they are ungratefull, perjured, full of fraud, flouting and deceit, unconstant, waspish, toyish, light, sullen, proud, discourteous and cruell, and yet they were by God created, and by nature formed, and therefore by policy and wisdome to bee avoided (Trill, Chedgoy & Osborne, eds. 1997: 85).

The following year, a woman with the pseudonym of Ester Sowernam published *Ester Hath Hang'd Haman*, refuting Swetnam's attack by describing virtuous women

3. I am referring to "Ester Sowernam", Rachel Speght, "Constantia Munda", and "Mary Tattle-well and Joan Hit-him-home", if all those pseudonyms actually correspond to women, see Purkiss 1992.

from the scriptures and history, and eulogising Elizabeth I. One of the things she rebutted was Swetnam's accusation that women were lustful and provoking. She claimed that it was actually men who were given to seeking women and soliciting them to lewdness. Men made vows to make them dishonest, hired procurers, wrote letters, and assured women of love, "when the end proves but lust". Using similar arguments to those of Wroth and Zayas, Sowernam contended:

Some will pretend marriage, another offer continuall maintenance, but when they have obtained their purpose, what shall a woman finde, just that which is her everlasting shame and grieffe, she hath made herselfe the unhappie subject to a lustfull bodie, and the shamefull stall of a lascivious tongue (Trill, Chedzoy & Osborne eds. 1997: 99).

Sowernam's pamphlet was similar, then, to a previous one entitled *Jane Anger Her Protection for Women* (1589). The author here claimed that "In woman is only true fidelity; except in her there is no constancy" (Martin, ed. 1997: 92), and that in fact one could never write enough of man's falsehood. In a conclusion that reminds us of the Wife of Bath, Anger declared:

I would that antient writers could as well have busied their heads about deciphering the deceits of their own sex as they have about setting down our own follies: I would some would call in question that now which hath ever been questionless (91).

Few male writers engaged themselves in the revision of literature that Jane Anger demanded. But, as we have seen in this paper, the women who started writing in the Renaissance certainly did. It seems to me very meaningful indeed that the first female novelists in England and Spain had similar anxieties about this matter. After the evidence presented, it seems right to say that there were patent parallels between Wroth's *Urania* and Zayas's novels in their manner of approaching male inconstancy. Both writers claimed that it was inherent to men's nature and that it consequently prevented any harmonious relationship between the sexes. Their attitude contrasted with that of their male fellow writers, and their narrative works showed a different perspective towards love, marriage, gender, and genre. Wroth and Zayas did actually question what had been "questionless" from a social point of view: the cliché of women's lustfulness and infidelity. But they also did it from a literary point of view, because their doubts about successful love relationships were shaking the foundations of the very same narrative genres they used: the romance and the *novela cortesana*.

The Wife of Bath and Jane Anger had argued that, if the lion had drawn the picture, the result would have been remarkably different, i.e. if women had written as many books as men, they would have shown the perversion of Adam's sons. The works of Wroth and Zayas demonstrate that they were right.

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