

WROTH AND WEAMYS: TWO DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO PASTORAL ROMANCE, LOVE, AND GENDER

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This paper intends to analyse the main differences between the first two prose narratives written by women in English: Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1621) and Anna Weamys's *A Continuation of Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia* (1651). Although both are pastoral romances modelled on Sidney's famous work of fiction, with a focus on amorous affairs and female characters, their approaches to genre, love, and gender are not similar as one might expect them to be. Wroth uses pastoral romance to satirise the Jacobean society in the manner of a *roman à clef*, to show her scepticism about romantic love due to men's inconstancy, and to question the conventional representation of women in Renaissance literature. However, Weamys seems to use pastoral romance as an exercise of wishful thinking (her Arcadian world can be seen as a fantasy of what the social and political situation should be like), she believes in romantic love leading to marriage, and her portrayal of women is more conventional than Wroth's. In general, these two attitudes—one more satirical and sceptical, and the other more moralistic and romantic—will continue throughout the tradition of female novelists that will develop later.

The first English prose narratives written by women, Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621) and Anna Weamys's *A Continuation of Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia* (1651), were both pastoral romances modelled on Sidney's famous prose fiction. Sequels and supplements of literary texts were common at the time, as the very nature of romance and, in particular, of the *Arcadia*—which was incomplete—favoured that practice. Four male authors actually wrote extensions of Sidney's work. Therefore, we should not dismiss Wroth's and Weamys's narratives for being supplementary. In their case, using the *Arcadia* as a main source was a way to authorise their writing (Walker 1996: 172) and to place themselves on the same stage as Sidney, so it was “an act of courage” rather than an evidence of feminine subservience or aesthetic docility (Cullen 1994: xxxii). In fact, they reworked the original male-authored text, imposing a feminine perspective that produced meaningful alterations in subject-matter, characterisation, narrative voice, and style. However, this has been analysed by many critics (Beilin 1987, Swift 1990, Hackett 1992, Walker 1996, and Cullen 1994 among others), and what

this paper attempts to study is the difference between Wroth's and Weamys's approaches to genre and gender, because they are not as similar as we might expect them to be.

Mary Wroth used pastoral romance in order to satirise the vices of the contemporary upper class in the manner of a *roman à clef*. Many of the adventures and misfortunes of the kings and queens, princes and princesses, shepherds and shepherdesses that appear in the *Urania* mirror the life of actual members of the Jacobean court. This was noted by her first readers, such as John Chamberlain, George Manners, and Edward Denny. In particular, the latter was so convinced that Wroth's story of Sirelius reflected notorious events in his family life that he irately complained about it. As a consequence, the book was withdrawn from sale and the completion was never published. In her authoritative "Critical Introduction" to the *Urania*, Josephine Roberts offers a detailed reconstruction of some of the private relationships represented in Wroth's romance (1995: lxix-xcviii). This "shadowing", as Roberts calls it, includes the author herself, her husband, and many personages in the Sidney and Herbert families. Sidney had done something similar in the *Arcadia* but not to such an extent. John Barclay's *Argenis*, published in Latin also in 1621, circulated with a key to the correspondences. Yet, as Roberts remarks, "Wroth created a highly complex fiction that provides for the intermittent shadowing of actual lives and events, often under multiple figures" (1995: lxx). That is to say, Wroth employed an original version of the *roman à clef* technique.

The use of this technique in a pastoral romance complicates the relationship between fantasy and "real life" inherent in prose fiction (see Hackett 1992: 48). The events and characters shown in the *Urania* may seem wholly conventional and fantastic to a modern reader. However, many of them are largely drawn from reality. This does not make the *Urania* a *realistic novel*. Its plot structure, characterisation, setting, and style are certainly those typical of romance; but the world portrayed cannot be seen as a *heterocosmos*, a hypothetical universe of ideal images that are supposed to represent how human nature ought to be, as is often the case in Elizabethan romance. Instead, Wroth produces an ironical superposition of the seamy side of reality into the conventionally idealising nature of pastoral romance.

Wroth cannot completely adhere to the clichés of that genre because she seems not to believe in romantic love. In the *Urania* Wroth questions two basic elements of romance: idealised love and happy marriage, and this is due to men's inconstancy. The central story of the constant Pamphilia and the unfaithful Amphilanthus is mirrored in many of the inset narratives that form the complex structure of this romance. As Kroniris has noted: "In conventional romances people come for succour to valiant knights who undertake to fight in their cause, but in the *Urania* these people are almost exclusively women who have been victims of love affairs and forced marriages" (1992: 126). Wroth harshly censures fathers who force their daughters to marry against their will, and husbands who become unfaithful or aggressive. This situation leads many of these women to transgress cultural norms: they disobey parental authority and escape undesirable

matches, or they start adulterous relationships. In spite of Wroth's adherence to traditional female values, particularly constancy, she views these transgressive, discontented women with sympathy.

This takes us to the third point I would like to deal with here, which is Wroth's representation of women in the *Urania*. The main characters of this romance are female, yet they are not mere objects of male desire but female subjects with a certain degree of activity. In words of Janet Clare: "Through the figures of Urania, Antissia, and particularly Pamphilia, we have the first exploration in English romance literature by a woman writer of female subjectivity which initiates action. Urania's mode of agency is as a counsellor to others, whereas, interestingly, Pamphilia is presented as a writer" (1998: 56).

Pamphilia conforms to conventional female values to a large extent: she is a paragon of constancy, discretion, self-control, and modesty. Nevertheless, she combines these virtues with other qualities that entail an agency, an ability to express herself creatively, and a political power that were not so common at the time. As Walker remarks, Pamphilia's secrecy is paradoxically what makes her write, and her ability to write well is associated with her self-control (1996: 174). Moreover, Pamphilia is a queen and acts as such in the story. She is praised for her affection for and constancy to her subjects, as she considers herself married to her kingdom, "from which Husband, shee could not bee divorced" (Roberts 1995: 262). Thus Pamphilia reflects attributes of Elizabeth I, as Beilin has rightly observed (1987: 227-8).

Urania is the other heroine in Wroth's romance. She is different from Pamphilia—although she is likewise virtuous and her friend—and different from her namesake in Sidney's work. The *Arcadia* opens with the two shepherds, Claius and Strephon, lamenting the absence of the "fair shepherdess" Urania, who in fact remains absent all throughout the story, thus acquiring an allegorical significance. But Wroth materialises this idealised Urania (see Miller 1989: 126-27, and Walker 1996: 177), quantitatively speaking not as present as Pamphilia, but certainly remarkable. She bears the name of the work, opens the story, achieves her goal of finding her lost identity, and assumes the role of counsellor. Urania warns Pamphilia of the sterility and harmfulness of idolising love, and advises her to preserve her health by abandoning that torturing fidelity to a repeatedly unfaithful man. Pamphilia will end up accepting the impossibility of maintaining constancy in such a mutable world at the end of the unpublished part of the romance, when she marries King Rodomandro. Urania herself, as a response to male inconstancy, changes lovers with no stain on her virtue, as she, and probably Wroth too, believe that those who suffer infidelity "are free to choose again" (Roberts 1995: 469-70).

Therefore, we can say that, in spite of her admiration for conventionally female values such as constancy, modesty, and self-control, Wroth modifies the representation of women typical of most male-authored romances by emphasising the connotation of heroism as these virtues are accomplished in a world dominated by mutability, vanity, and foolishness. Wroth's heroines are not so much objects but subjects: they have a considerable degree of independent agency, are fairly

free to express their desires and their complaints about male oppression, and play successful roles as writers, monarchs, and counsellors.

Working on similar material, however, Anna Weamys achieves different results, probably because her aims and her background were not the same as Wroth's. Most likely a younger and more inexperienced woman, or perhaps simply a more idealistic person, Weamys never meant to shadow reality or cast doubt on romantic love. Her approach to pastoral romance was an exercise of wishful thinking, since her Arcadian world can be seen as a fantasy of what she would like the socio-political situation to be. She created a *heterocosmos* of ideal images similar to that found in many Elizabethan romances. Let us see how her narrator describes Plangus' arrival in Arcadia:

But at last he entered into the pleasant country of Arcadia, which was adorned with stately woods. No cries were heard there but of the lambs, and they in sport too sounded their voices to make their play-fellow lambs answer them again in imitation of the like. And the abundance of shady trees that were there were so beautiful with the sweet melody of birds that anyone, save love-sick Plangus, might think it a sufficient harmony to draw away their delight from any other vanity of the world. Besides, there were the shepherds piping to their pretty shepherdesses whilst they cheerfully sang to pleasure them again. (Cullen 1994: 17)

So it seems here that Weamys joins the vision of pastoral as an opposition to courtly vanity and chaos, and a preference for the natural simplicity and harmony of an idealised countryside. But, as in Sidney's romance, the pastoral may easily have a political reading, the Arcadian landscape suggesting a perfectly harmonised society. In fact, in Weamys's *Continuation*, Basilius says that "he governed a quiet and a peaceable country and that he should very unwillingly teach his people the way of dissension" (19); and at the end, when the royal couples grow old, "they resigned their crowns to their lawful successors, and ended their days in peace and quietness" (105).

Although Weamys is not a member of the aristocracy like Wroth, she defends aristocratic values. Writing in the early 1650s, this certainly acquires a political significance that places her romance away from mere escapism and closer to the propaganda material deployed by the royalists at the time. As Cullen argues, genre, subject matter, and the prefacing commendatory poems support the hypothesis that this work "was the production of some sort of royalist network" (1994: xxix). But Weamys's defence of aristocratic values is not rigidly class-defined, as she does not exclude some rustics from the refined sentiment that she associates with heroic nobility (see Cullen 1994: xlvii-xlviii). Urania and Strephon transcend their class and join the code of gentility and sensibility that allows them to participate in the final multiple marriage together with the noble couples.

The whole *Continuation* is actually designed to pair off the single characters of Sidney's *Arcadia*, and reach that triumphant marriage at the end. This is how Weamys reworks the original text, she is not interested in the epic elements, and focuses rather on the happy and morally acceptable resolution of dangling love affairs. She eludes ethically dubious events that are present in the source text, such as Pamela and Musidorus' aborted elopement, the discovery of Philoclea

and Pyrocles sleeping side by side, the elements of mad love in the story of Plan-
gus and Erona, and Amphialus' hostility to Helena. Moreover, due to Weamys's
emphasis on love, she gives her Philisides, who is supposed to represent Sidney,
a romantic death as a lover and a poet, instead of the heroic death that Sidney
himself had actually had and that the writers of supplements to the *Arcadia* had
portrayed (Cullen 1994: *passim*).

When it is requited and leads to marriage, love contributes to the social har-
mony of the pastoral world that frames the action. When Amphialus and Helena
prepare their wedding, they are presented as examples of agreement and unity.
The three chariots that take them and their attendants are lined with three dif-
ferent colours: green, white, and blue signifying the princes' love, innocence,
and constancy. These concepts seem to go together in Weamys's *Continuation*,
where there are no examples of vice and infidelity that may question romantic
love. One of her characters states that, although love is often "mixed with bit-
terness (in consideration of some griefs that follow it) yet seldom it is but that
the conclusion is happy" (94-5). That is why only two minor characters, Claius
and Philisides, are left unmarried and they die of love, their funerals adding a
touch of sadness to the happy ending of multiple nuptials.

The bitterness referred to in the previous quotation is particularly significant,
as it has to do with the dangers of arranged marriage, which is a concern shared
by Wroth—as we have seen before—and most women writers of the time. Weamys
makes Urania's absence, so mysterious and allegorical in Sidney's text, be due to
male abuse. Weamys's Urania is not only a victim of her father's tyranny through
arranged marriage, but also a victim of Antaxius' and Lacemon's violence through
abduction and assault. She is thus presented as an object of male desire, who
rebels against it but lacks the desire and agency that characterises her namesake
in Wroth's work. Even when she is free to choose a husband, she surrenders her
choice to two men (although young and unselfish): Pyrocles and Musidorus. Yet
Weamys's Urania had previously proved both resolute not to submit to patriarchal
impositions and threats, and also cunning to escape from dire straits. So there
is a certain element of autonomy in her character.

Other heroines in this *Continuation* are allowed a higher degree of subjectivity
and action. Helena carries her beloved Amphialus on a litter to her kingdom
of Corinth, and has his wounds healed by skilful surgeons, although he largely
ignores her for he loves Philoclea. In spite of the melancholy this causes her,
Helena never gives up and, hearing of her rival's wedding, writes her a letter to
ask for compassion towards Amphialus' distress and towards her own affection
for him. When Philoclea reads this and Amphialus' willingness to obey her com-
mands, she enjoins him to marry Helena. He proves obedient to her by radically
changing his attitude to Helena and accepting her as his wife. The match is
successful and even presented as exemplary, as was shown above.

Following the conventions of courtly love rhetoric, other heroes also claim to
be slaves of their beloved, ready to submit to their commands. Clytifon says he
is Helena's "loyal servant" (38), the narrator describes how Philoclea's tears are
wiped away by "her servant Pyrocles" (41), and Claius declares he and Strephon

were “slaves to Urania’s piercing eyes” and “vassals to her devoted graces” (74). But in this romance, it seems that this is something more than a rhetorical cliché, since those men evince to be truly devoted to their loves, and those women then may actually feel a respect and an affection that few of Wroth’s heroines enjoyed. Weamys’s female protagonists are all within the bounds of patriarchal morality, are never a serious threat to those norms, but they are allowed a certain agency, some chances to decide, command, and be obeyed.

Weamys’s pastoral world is, therefore, a realm of fantasy where women enjoy a certain amount of power. This is even true in the folk tale told by Mopsa, which the narrator qualifies as “tedious” and “ridiculous”, but which presents a fancy world dominated by women. The young heroine of this inset story endures great hardship in search of her missing beloved knight. She was helped by other women to find him, release him from bondage to some witches, and offer him a vast amount of money that would guarantee them a happy life forever after. The story imitates the typical structures of folk tales, but with an interesting gender reversal.

As a conclusion we must say that both Wroth and Weamys appropriated the genre of pastoral romance for their own purposes. The result was in both cases the construction of feminocentric narratives that dealt mainly with women from a female point of view, and chiefly addressed to women readers. However, these texts show two different attitudes to pastoral romance, love, and gender. Wroth’s is more satirical and sceptical, whereas Weamys’s is more moralistic and romantic. Two approaches to prose fiction that will, in general, continue throughout the tradition of female novelists that they started.

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