

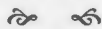
Gender Reconstitution: How Women Write Sonnets

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Abstract:

Gender is a performance in most actions, including writing. The sonnet, as one of the earliest forms of poetry in the English language, has created and enforced the gender constructions of time periods; however, when women sonneteers such as Lady Mary Wroth, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Adrienne Rich take on this particular form, they undermine the gender binary of male and female by taking on both the traditionally feminine and masculine traits to shed light on the gender and sexuality issues of their particular time period and culture.



What people write and narrate about themselves creates movement and change for the world around them. Female writers and sonneteers, just by writing, create a world in which women's concerns are recognized and discussed rather than just allowing masculine and patriarchal assumptions to control the dialogue of gender and gender roles. They have to earn symbolic capital by writing and allowing their stories and lives to be expressed publicly. Harriet Ottenheimer, an anthropologist who specializes in linguistics, claims, "Symbolic capital 'buys' you (or establishes your claim to) position and power in social and cultural contexts" (120). By obtaining symbolic capital, female writers make a strong claim that others should read their works and know their stories and politics. The sonnet tradition may have started as a supporter of the gender binary of female and male and, when written by men, it has served to show masculine needs and pursuits of a female. However, this pursuit takes away the personhood of the sonnet lady, forcing her to conform to unrealistic expectations, such as being both the virgin and the whore, when the sonneteer wants her for his physical pleasure rather than a mutually beneficial relationship. Yet, men are not the only ones to write and take on certain roles; in fact, the particular role of sonneteer is not inherently masculine except for sociocultural constructions of gender. As Hélène Cixous, in "The Newly Born Woman," argues, people have both masculine and feminine qualities and are therefore bisexual in terms of gender. Female sonneteers, including Lady Mary Wroth of the Elizabethan era, Edna St. Vincent Millay from the 1920s, and Adrienne Rich of today, by their very acts of writing and publishing, gain symbolic capital to draw attention to the inherent problems of the gender binary of their particular social context. They face these issues when writing as they have to undermine the gender role and binary that previous male poets have established, as well as having to acknowledge their more masculine traits (such as sexual longing) and perform their gender role differently than society has sanctioned for them.

During the Elizabethan era, women were viewed not as humans but as property; they were virginal daughters that were bartered for to become wives and mothers. Much of their worth was placed on chastity. Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, as the first sonnet sequence published by a woman, demonstrates both Cixous' bisexuality by using the masculine sonnet form with

a musical rhyme scheme, and Butler's gender performance as Wroth has to visualize herself as both male in writing and female in desire.

In "The Labyrinth as Style in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*," Mary Moore also discusses the labyrinthine rhyme scheme and the symbolism of such in Wroth's project. Wroth switches between the Petrarchan and Shakespearian form of sonnet, but also has a more repetitive rhyme scheme, coded as ABBAABBA or ABABBABA in the octave—the first eight lines of the sonnet. Moore writes about the labyrinth, "Like the mazes of classical literature, architecture, and art familiar to Renaissance readers of Pliny, Ovid, and Virgil, Wroth's artifact represents perplexity even as it perplexes" (109). Wroth's style and rhythm are reflective of the renaissance culture allowing her project to happen and for her to take on the role of sonneteer. Moore continues by explaining that Wroth's sequence has the two necessary elements of a labyrinth, "enclosure and complexity" (109). Sonnet 32 shows the enclosure and the loss of knowing where one is due not only to the repetitive rhyme scheme, but also the repetition of the ending words: "wings," "desire," "brings," and "retire." This also lends itself to the performance of being feminine by not taking formal risks, even though Wroth takes on a masculine performance in her subject.

Performing gender can also be described as a labyrinth as to take on gender roles can enclose oneself, but the performance is also complex as it does change from moment to moment. In Sonnet 48, the last in the sequence, Pamphilia feels desire to the point of despair, which goes against the tradition of the lady typically never showing desire or interest as a way to prove her worth. Pamphilia in the first quartet says, "How like a fire doth Love increase in me / The longer it lasts, the stronger still / The greater, purer, brighter; and doth fill / No eye with wonder more, then hopes still bee" (48.1-4). Women at this time period were not seen as being able to feel real desire, but Wroth's female speaker does feel real desire and knows what she wants, showing that she is not a second-class object. As Judith Butler, in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," claims, "[T]he very category of the personal is expanded to include political structures" (906). Wroth's use of the personal and performing outside her assigned role in her project has political consequences. Pamphilia becomes suicidal, and Wroth left court life after the publication because her desire caused political and personal discomfort.

Throughout the sequence, Wroth uses imagery of her male predecessors, but in oppositional ways. Many Elizabethan male sonneteers use symbolism of light to explore the beauty of the lady and the comfort of loneliness and coldness at night where desire can be hidden. Wroth's sonnets, however, focus more on the dark, but not as a way to alleviate guilt; rather, it seems more a reflection of Pamphilia's anguish at loving the unfaithful Amphilanthus. Wroth begins her sequence, "When night's blacke Mantle could most darknesse prove / And sleep (deaths Image) did my sense hyre / From Knoweladge of my selfe, then thoughts

did move / Swifter than those, most swiftnesse needs require" (1.1-4). While the male sonnets cling to the night to be by themselves and hide their anguished longing, Pamphilia seeks the night to know herself better and to acknowledge her desire of both love and death. However, viewing Wroth's sonnets as a woman claiming sexual and romantic agency oversimplifies the issue. As Courtney Lehman writes in "Crouch Tiger, Hidden Agenda: How Shakespeare and the Renaissance are Taking the Rage out of Feminism," "[T]he kaleidoscopic view of female subjectivity purveyed by these films is eclipsed by their more powerful fetishization of sex—the power to deny or to enjoy it—as the heroine's only legitimate means of career advancement" (260). The way people currently look at the English Renaissance, specifically the Elizabethan era, views it from a sexual viewpoint, such as the debates of whether Elizabeth I was a virgin or not (Wickham News, Pg. 23a).

While the sonnets of this time period, including Wroth's, focus on a romantic and sexual longing or relationship, Wroth's twisting of sonnet symbols shows that women's issues involved more than the status of virgin, mother, or whore. She wants more than just romantic and sexual satisfaction; part of the frustration of Pamphilia is her own bisexuality as she has agency and humanity within the sequence, rather than being an object. Pamphilia demands things from Amphilanthus: "Yet this, Sir God, your Boy-ship I despise, / Your charmes I obey, but love not want of eyes" (7.14-15). The speaker presents herself very much as a female in opposition to "Boy-ship," but still claims her feelings as her own—not belonging to him. Wroth may have even agreed with Cixous' statement, "Accepting the other sex as a component makes [writers] much richer, more various, stronger, and—to that extent that they are mobile—very fragile" (351). Wroth's Pamphilia does exactly that: accepts that her lover is a man, or "boy," and allows herself to be put in a very fragile place.

Even though Wroth came before first-wave feminism, the issues of gender were still present during the Elizabethan era; Wroth in order to express herself and gain symbolic capital had to break free from the limited gender role of the time. Despite being the first published woman author, women still wrote frequently, which allows and brings Wroth to "imagine a culture where women have authority over the meaning of their texts" (Snook 147). According to Snook, Wroth wanted women to be more than just objects of desire and literary fantasy characters. Wroth's project upholds the feminist idea of the personal being public as she uses a personal story to start a debate of the public world. This also lends itself to Wroth being bisexual and not just simply female. These issues continue to haunt feminism and women writers, who have to break through the barriers patriarchy has created.

Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote in the United States during the 1920s, when many feminist issues came to the forefront. The 19th Amendment was ratified August 20, 1920, allowing women the right to vote. First-wave feminism began to accomplish many of its goals which included this right as well as equality between the sexes. However, despite gaining some equality, a woman would have still been seen primarily as daughter, mother, and wife.

Millay also performed gender in her writing as she expressed what she wanted from her lover; in some ways, by expressing her

sexual and romantic desires, she became more masculine. In *Fatal Interview*, Millay's poetic speaker addresses a former lover rather than pursuing a current interest. In Sonnet 12 of *Fatal Interview*, the speaker dares to warn the Olympian gods that her time with her lover has more importance than their warfare: "Olympian gods, mark now my bedside lamp / Blown out; and be advised too late that he / Whom you call sire is stolen into the camp / Of warring Earth, and lies abed with me" (1-4). Even though she still is the woman in the relationship, she has more control as she can tell the gods to let her have their "sire." She does not say he would rather be here than with the Olympians; the focus remains on what she wants more than what a man may desire. Butler writes, "It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way" (907). Millay's speaker can be interpreted as female, but she also contests the submissiveness of the female identity. Andrea Powell Wolfe claims, "Millay understood, and ... manipulated the construction of gender as a performance" (155). While Butler discusses how humans unconsciously "perform" gender and accept or defy it, Millay seems to have known that she was acting, and both accepted and defied it to model agency for women.

Millay also plays with the bisexual nature of having agency as a female, of having to fulfill expectations both masculine and feminine. In Sonnet 35 of *Fatal Interview*, the speaker longs for her "ruined garden as it stood," but this imagery does not seem to indicate a longing for virginity; rather, it indicates a longing for warmth and love once more (1). The sonnet ends, "Though summer's rife and the warm rose in season, / Rebuke me not: I have a winter reason" (13-14). Millay consistently presents the imagery of seasons, with summer attached to feeling love and winter to jadedness. This conceit seems more consistent with male sonneteers who become angry with the sonnet lady for rebuking them. Cixous wrote, "[T]here is a nonclosure that is not submission but confidence and comprehension; that is not an opportunity for destruction but for wonderful expansion" (353). Even though Millay's sonnet ends with the speaker feeling weary, summer will come again, and she does not feel defeated or destroyed by the loss of love. Her garden lies in ruin because it is winter; it is not permanently destroyed, and she can love again, even if she goes against the gender ideology by loving multiple people and not relying on one man. This makes her writing more bisexual than her male predecessors who do not address or contest the ideology of their era, even if they have similar poetic styles in being strictly formal with the rhyme scheme. This goes back to Wolfe's claim that Millay knew how to perform gender. Like Wroth, the subject of her project could be radical; her language could not.

Even though Wroth and Millay both stayed within the formal elements of the sonnet, Adrienne Rich completely broke away from the formal tradition. Rich wrote in "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," "When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her" (36). Rich had to be different with her form and make her own rules for her expression of the emotions and narrative that encompass her truth. In *21 Love Poems*, many of the sonnets are rarely the traditional fourteen lines which cannot contain her reality. In Sonnet 2, she

even expresses the difficulty of poetry: “drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere / and I want to show her one poem / which is the poem of my life” (6-8). This type of honesty about the difficulty of writing rarely appears in poems or fiction; sometimes authors will discuss it in essays on writing but very rarely in their creative projects. Rich’s candor allows this sequence to be brutally honest and has more of an impact than Wroth’s or Millay’s because of it. The only sign of dishonesty occurs in “The Floating Poem;” this poem is not dishonest, but placing it outside the number sequence indicates that readers can, and potentially should, avoid it. This poem is very erotic and between two women: “Your traveled, generous thighs / between which my whole face has come and come—the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there” (5-7). This imagery may be more honest than the rest of the poem about Rich’s love life, but she places it outside the numbered sequence as if it is something to be hidden. Cixous also discusses sexuality: “When the wonder of being sexual and turmoil is expressed, she does not protect herself against these unknown femininess; she surprises herself at seeing, being, pleasuring in her gift of changeability” (354). Discussing sex and desire creates a vulnerability that some cannot reconcile with their own privacy, of their own fulfilling the feminine gender role. However, Rich still published it, people still read it, and more can come from brutal honesty even when it is harder to accomplish than not.

Rich also more directly discusses the issues of the gender binary. In Sonnet 5 of *Twenty-One Love Poems*, the focuses are on how male writers have portrayed women and, in a sense, confined that gender role to “deviants, witnesses,” and on how nobody realizes the story of women because they are ignored (8). Rich recognizes “the ghosts—their hands clasped for centuries— / of artists dying in childbirth, wise-women charred at the stake, / centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves; / and we still have to stare into the absence / of men would not, women who could not, speak” (14-18). These lines directly confront the lack of women’s voices and the need for women to gain symbolic capital. Rich defies and redefines form to completely gain symbolic capital and to not stay partially submissive to male writers, as Wroth and Millay had to be. This comes through clearly in the last lines of the sequence: “I choose to be a figure in that light, / half-blotted by darkness, something moving / across that space, the color of stone / greeting the moon, yet more than stone: / a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle” (21: 11-15). She chooses to let her female side out, to tell her story as a lesbian and as a woman. Unlike Wroth and Millay, taking on the writing of

sonnets does not force Rich to face masculinity; rather she faces the patriarchy and the problem of oppression.

Female writers have to be aware of their culture and the gender roles assigned to them. However, this does not mean females have to stay aligned with their culture. Often, the very fact of writing creates an agenda, one in which women often have to confront masculinity and patriarchy. Wroth, Millay, and Rich, as products of their time and culture, have to do this and have to take on the concept of gender to express their stories, as does every female who wishes to write, or wishes to change her circumstances.

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