



LADY MARY WROTH'UN *THE COUNTESS OF MONTGOMERY'S URANIA* ESERİNDE KADIN EYLEMİ VE EVLİLİK GELENEKLERİNİN ELEŞTİRİSİ¹

FEMALE AGENCY AND CRITICISM OF MARITAL PRACTICES IN LADY MARY WROTH'S *THE COUNTESS OF MONTGOMERY'S URANIA*

Merve AYDOĞDU ÇELİK²

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Öz

Lady Mary Wroth, hem kişisel geçmişi hem de kaleme aldığı eserlerden ötürü on altıncı yüzyıl sosyal ve politik kültürü bağlamında yenilikçi ve sıradışı bir figürdür. Bir kadın tarafından yazılan ilk sone dizisinin ve ilk nesir romansın yazarı olmasının yanısıra, ilk kadın oyun yazarlarından da biridir. Edebi üretimi çerçevesinde ele alındığında, Wroth, kadınlarla ilgili konulara öncelik veren bir yazar olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Sone dizisi kadın sesini ifade etmek için bir araç olarak hizmet eder; romansı iffet-sükunet-itaat düsturunu sorgulayan ve ona isyan eden sayısız kadın karakter içerir; tek oyunu ise kadınların başarısını vurgularken çiftler arasındaki ilişkiler üzerine kuruludur. Wroth'un kadınların sorunlarına odaklanma konusundaki kararlılığı, bir kadının görünüşte karşı konulamaz bir sosyal ve politik oluşum altında elde edebileceği muhalefeti vurgulamaktadır. Wroth, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* eserinde, baskıcı evlilik uygulamalarına direnen kadınların deneyimlerine yoğunlaşmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, bu makale, evlilik kurumuna ilişkin sosyal bağlamı,

Wroth'un bu durum hususundaki eleştirisini ve istenmeyen evlilik durumlarında kadın eylemini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Lady Mary Wroth, Rönesans, romans, evlilik.*

Abstract

Lady Mary Wroth is an innovative and unconventional figure both in terms of her personal background and her literary production within the sixteenth century social and political context. She is the author of the first sonnet sequence written by a woman, the producer of the first prose romance by a female pen, and one of the first female playwrights. Regarding her literary output, Wroth stands out as an author who prioritises the topics in relation to women. Her sonnet sequence serves as an instrument for expressing female voice; her romance includes myriad of female characters who question and rebel against the maxim of chaste-silent-obedient; her only play deals with relationships among several couples emphasising female achievement. Wroth's determination to focus on women's problems underscores the dissidence a woman could achieve under an apparently irresistible social and political formation. In *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, she concentrates on the experiences of women who resist oppressive marital practices. In this sense, this paper aims to examine the social context as to the institution of marriage, the criticism Wroth poses against it, and female assertiveness in the case of unwanted matrimonies.

Keywords: *Lady Mary Wroth, Renaissance, romance, marriage.*

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² Dr., Independent Researcher, merve_aydogdu1987@hotmail.com, +905457472746

ORCID: 0000-0001-7354-9705

1. Introduction

Lady Mary Wroth (1587-1651/3) is quite an unconventional literary figure in terms of her personal background and her literary production considering the age she lives in. Her oeuvre includes the first complete sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621) written by a woman, the first published work of prose fiction *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621) and one of the first plays *Love's Victory* (c. 1620) by a female dramatist (Miller, "Mary" 150). In view of the pieces she produces, Wroth stands out as an author who prioritises the topics in relation to women. Her lyric sequence functions as a medium for the expression of female experience while the genre traditionally silences the female voice in favour of the male sonneteer; her romance harbours an array of female characters that act against the maxim of chaste-silent-obedient; her pastoral tragicomedy focuses on the intersexual relationships with an emphasis on female agency. Her determination to deal with female issues underscores the dissidence a woman achieves under an apparently irresistible family structure and social formation. In *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, among many instances of female agency and achievement, she concentrates on the experiences of women who resist oppressive marital practices. In this sense, this paper aims to discuss the social context as to the institution of marriage, the criticism Wroth poses, and female assertiveness in the case of unwanted matrimonyes.

Lady Mary Wroth was born into the renowned Sidney family and literary circle in 1587. Her father was Robert Sidney (1563-1626) who authored several sonnets and her mother was Lady Barbara Gamage (1563-1621); her uncle was Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) the prominent Elizabethan poet and courtier and her aunt was Mary Sidney Herbert (1561-1621) the patron of literature and the translator of *Psalms*, Philippe de Mornay's *A Discourse of Life and Death*, Robert Garnier's *Antonius* and Petrarch's *Triumph of Death*. Lady Mary got married to Sir Robert Wroth (1576-1614) in September, 1604 and bore him a son a month before his death in 1614. The couple's only son James also died in 1616. Wroth's extramarital relationship with her cousin William Herbert the third Earl of Pembroke might have started before their respective marriages while it is known for certain that they had two illegitimate children after Sir Robert Wroth's death. Although her extramarital relationship and the birth of illegitimate children ostracised her from the court circles, Wroth could raise her two children by the support of the Sidneys and the Herberts. There is no extant information with regard to the final years of her life except that she died either in 1651 or 1653 (Miller, *Changing* 8).

Wroth's affair with William Herbert and out-of-wedlock births³ obviously indicate her free spirit and sexual independence undaunted by social prescriptions and the death of her husband provides her the relatively autonomous position of widowhood in which she incorporates the roles of motherhood, loverhood and authorhood. Situated at the matrix of familial relationships, Wroth achieves a certain amount of independence by repudiating the gender stereotypes the patriarchy assigns her. In this sense, her biography reflects her will to transcend the social boundaries that enclose her.

Wroth's strong Sidney heritage prepares a solid ground for her literary career. As Hannay states, "*when Wroth began to write, she saw herself not merely as a woman, but as a Sidney woman with a clear sense of poetic authority in her lineage*" ("Your" 16) which was hinted by the title of her romance:

The Countesse of Montgomeries URANIA. Written by the right honorable the Lady MARY WROATH. Daughter to the right Noble Robert Earle of Leicester. And Neece to the ever famous and renowned Sr. Phillips Sidney knight. And to the most exelent Lady Mary Countesse of Pembroke late deceased.

While she had the option to publish her work anonymously, Wroth preferred to make herself visible on the title page by situating herself within the Sidney legacy. Her aunt Mary Sidney Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke was her "*most important model*" (Roberts, Critical Introduction xxxvii) and, considering Mary Sidney's literary success, "*the label 'woman writer' was not an oxymoron*" (Hannay, "Your" 16) for Mary Wroth. Moreover, adopting an egalitarian stance, "*the Countess no doubt, encouraged Mary, along with her own sons William and Philip Herbert, to write poetry as their uncle had done*" (Hannay, "Mary" 550). True it is that Mary Sidney Herbert is considerably influential for Wroth's literary development but Wroth does not limit her oeuvre to "*permitted feminine genres*" (Hannay, "Your" 16) or translations as her aunt does but employs the masculine literary genres in order to create a feminine vision. Wroth's identification with the Countess of Pembroke creates a new paradigm of intergenerational connection that culminates in the development of female agency. That is, Wroth benefits from her Sidney heritage yet employs it "*transgressively to replace heroes with heroines at the center of several major genres*" (Lewalski, *Writing* 7). Interestingly enough, even when she is a little child, Mary Wroth is given the chance to voice her opinion on household affairs. Hannay records the anecdote on the choice of a steward for the family estate: even

³ It signifies non-verbal resistance contrary to the imprisoning nature of marriage. Illegitimacy was under strict surveillance by the church and there was even a statute enured in 1576 that ordered punishment for illegitimacy. In 1610, it was decided that the mothers should be placed in the houses of correction for their crime. The powerful Sidney family was immune to such legislation, though (Waller, "Sidney" 52).

though the person Little Mall – as her parents call her – recommends is not suitable for the position, Robert Sidney hires him, as he cannot refuse his daughter. While the particulars of the choice are not known, Hannay finds the situation remarkable in that her parents obviously take into consideration the wish of a nine-year-old child (*Mary Sidney* 62). The fact that the Sidney couple valued her opinion, communicated with her and gave her the opportunity to express herself must have given Wroth the self-confidence to articulate fearlessly her ideas outside the familial borders.

Nevertheless, Robert Sidney was still under the influence of the patriarchal mores of his age. Not surprisingly, Mary Wroth's marriage was based on a patriarchal arrangement, which was apparently a failure from the beginning. The letter Robert Sidney wrote to his wife only ten days after the marriage records the mismatch:

There was somewhat that discontent [Sir Robert Wroth]: but the particulars I could not get out of him, onely that hee protests that hee cannot take any exceptions to his wife nor her carriage towards him . . . It were very soon for any unkindness to begin: and therefore whatsoever the matters bee, I pray you let all things bee carried in the best maner til wee all doe meet. For mine enimies would be very glad for such an occasion to make themselves merry at mee. (Lewalski, *Writing* 245)

The letter reveals not only the discord between the newly-married couple but also Robert Sidney's concern with his prestige within public that leads him even to disregard his daughter's happiness. Ben Jonson also relates to William Drummond that "My Lord Lisle's daughter, my Lady Wroth, is unworthily married on a jealous husband" (*Notes* 24). Wroth's discontent with the custom is echoed in *Urania* via several stories in which the sufferings of women by the patriarchal figures are exposed.

Apart from her arranged marriage, the literary value of Wroth's output becomes more significant considering the period of her production that coincides with the reign of James I (1603-1625). As Lewalski summarises, the Jacobean era was a "regressive period for women" because of James I discrimination against them. During his reign, female education and freedom receded in comparison with the relatively free atmosphere the Elizabethan women experienced and myriad misogynist sermons and tracts were published that contended the biological and intellectual shortcomings of women ("Writing" 794). James I was a misogynist in terms of the woman question and he was an absolutist in politics. The French ambassador Beaumont depicts his derogatory behaviour at the court as follows:

He piques himself on great contempt for women. They are obliged to kneel before him when they are presented, he exhorts them openly to virtue, and scoffs with great levity at men who pay them honour. You may easily conceive that the English ladies do not spare him but hold him in abhorrence and tear him to pieces with their tongues, each according to her humour. (Roberts, Critical Introduction xv-xvi)

In the same vein, James I both in his works *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) and *Basilikon Doron* (1599) and in his several speeches emphasises the divine rights of the kings and inferiority of the female sex. For instance, in his “Speech of 1609” he states “*the State of MONARCHIE*” to be “*the supremest thing vpon earth*” (307) and in “A Speech in the Starre-Chamber” he imports that “*Kings sit in the Throne of God, and they themselues are called Gods*” (326). His discourse reinforces the patriarchal formation as he compares the hierarchical structure within the household with the governance of the state: “*Kings are also Fathers of families: for a King is trewly Parens patriæ, the politique of his people*” (307). In *The True Law of Free Monarchies* he preaches that “*by the Law of Nature the King becomes a naturall Father to all his Lieges . . . And as the Father of his fatherly duty is bound to care . . . his children, euen so is the bound to care for all his subjects*” (55). Likewise, in *Basilikon Doron* he advises his son Prince Henry to expect unquestioned submission from his wife that attests to his patriarchal mind-set: “*It is your office to command, and hers to obey; as ye to command; as willing to follow, as ye to go before; your loue being wholly knit vnto her, and all her affections louingly bent to follow your will*” (36). James I believed that the king was the representative of God on earth and the father was the substitute of the king within the household. Their authority was absolutely inviolable as it was sanctioned by God. He thereby legitimated the dominance of the patriarch over the other members of the family rendering the subjection of woman to the male head as natural as the subjection of the folk to a king.

As well as the oppressive politics of James I, there was also a burst of conduct literature throughout the sixteenth century whose sole subject matter was the regulation of female behaviour. How women should get education, what they could read, what they were allowed to do, and when or where they could speak were under strict surveillance by the moralists and educationalists; how women should behave at home and in public was also decided by the patriarchs and conveyed through conduct manuals, theological pamphlets, sermons, advice and educational books and exhortations to women. As the institutionalised Church increased the power of man and his public presence, femininity was depicted within the boundaries of domesticity. What wives could read, for instance, was limited to their developing feminine skills

in order to please their husbands; they were preached to pursue proper behaviour such as keeping their feelings under control, being useful to their husbands and being affectionate to them without excessive sexual desire. Conduct literature was an instrument for fortifying the patriarchal ideology. The sexual regulation of female behaviour was emblematic of the patriarchal power and it was of utmost importance for the *healthy* maintenance of the institution of family because a woman's honour was metonymic for the family's honour and chastity was requisite for its spotlessness. Chastity inevitably meant obedience, which was, in effect, the natural result of silence. The speech was readily associated with a sexual impurity; the more a woman spoke, the more she was thought to be lascivious. In other words, the moralists reflect the cultural stereotypes of the age concerning the identification of religious devotion with invisibility in public. A virtuous woman is the one who reads religious works and silently meditates in her chamber unavailable to the public eye; seeking fame and being visible in public amount to disobedience to the Scripture and to the male authority. If a woman disobeys the male head, she is thought to be unchaste; if she is unchaste, she lacks the Christian virtues and feminine ideals. Trill summarises the ideal pattern expected of women in conduct literature during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

The key aspects of her life and character that are highlighted are her wisdom, piety, humility, meekness, love, constancy, charity, good household government and godly devotion. Above all, these qualities fit the woman for her role as "wife," "mother" and "mistress" of the household. This woman never engages in idle gossiping; instead, great success is laid upon the wholesomeness of her speech, which is usually compromised of biblical citation . . . Corporately, these texts indicate that the delineation of the exemplary Christian woman, [between] 1500-1700, did not alter significantly. (33)

The ideal woman was basically the one who devoted herself to her family and to God as the supreme patriarch without interfering in public affairs or being absorbed in idle thoughts but only reading the Gospels so as to gain wisdom. The following proverbs from John Ray's (1627-1705) *A Compleat Collection of Proverbs* (1670) "*many women, many words; many geese, many turds*" and "*free of her lips, free of her hips*" (Aughterson 224) conclude the attitude that associates female speech and disobedience with promiscuity in the period.

2. Female Agency and Criticism of Marital Practices

The story of Pamphilia, the Queen of Pamphilia and her constant love for Amphilanthus, the King of Naples constitute the backbone of *Urania* together with an array of inset stories that recount various adventures of male and female characters in various spheres. As regards to the woman question, Wroth objects to the gender expectations of her age because she “view[s] society as destructive of woman’s sense of self” (Swift 331) and she aims at creating “a feminine consciousness in conflict with societal values” (Swift 346). Her work is unquestionably dedicated to “the recovery of subordinate voices” (Sinfield, *Shakespeare* 25) because, notwithstanding the oppressive Jacobean social and political context, she manages to manifest resistance through her romance that functions as an act of self-assertion thanks to the articulation of female experience through several heroines. Wroth’s work also partially serves as an answer to Joseph Swetnam’s misogynist tract *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615). She refutes the accusations Swetnam charges women with such as promiscuity, errantry, contumacy and inconstancy and the cultural belief that women are weak creatures who lack reason and constancy in the several episodes of *Urania*. Wroth reflects the female struggle such as the commodification of women in marriage; she tries to save her female characters from the object position; she explores their physical and psychological quests as individuals; and, she refutes the falsifications by the male discourse.

The politics of James I together with the misogynist tracts that have accumulated throughout the years reinforce the negative image of women. Mary Wroth does not accept these social constructions nor does she internalise them but mounts strong resistance through her fiction in which women thwart patriarchal social order through their choices, resolutions or solutions. Wroth contests the place allotted to women through the exploration of female experience. She nourishes both from her own experiences and from her keen observation of the society in order to recuperate the female voice via various heroines who undergo several experiences. Despite the patriarchal familial context she is born into and the absolutist political regime she is raised in, she manages to “develop an oppositional selfhood” (Sinfield, *Faultlines* 37) in terms of her biography and the feminine matter she focuses on in her romance.

Marriage and marital practices have a substantial place in the romance. Wroth discusses the problem of the freedom of choice of the marriage partner as she regards it as a barrier to the agency. Through several stories, she conveys the female protest against the patriarchal domination in the debate of marriage. Wroth and her female characters reject the oppressive practices by criticising the custom of arranged marriage or by finding solutions to assert

independence in love and marriage. She makes the institution of marriage the focus in the bulk of romance so as to reveal its faulty aspects and the sufferings of women. Thus, *Urania* both establishes Wroth as an authorial figure who has the right to express her opinion on an issue that affects women including herself in the society and provides them with resistance mechanisms that would help them assert their individual will against the patriarchal authority. In a time when King James I instructs the priests to “*inveigh vehemently against the insolencies of women*” (Roberts, Critical Introduction xv) and the conduct manuals oppress them not to overreach their assigned roles, Wroth scrutinises if obedience to patriarchal authority is crucial, what happens when it is threatened or if there is any means for negotiation within the patriarchal structure. The network of relationships enables her to portray the panorama of the social formation that gives women little freedom. Through stories of enforced marriage and abusive fathers or husbands, Wroth criticises the dominant culture and creates alternative models for women represented by the heroines resistant to the patriarchal authority. As Cavanagh states, “*in contrast to the ‘silent woman’ image often associated with early literature, these female characters provide considerable amounts of dialogue to the text, often offering outspoken opinions on issues involving . . . domestic affairs*” (“Romancing” 20).

To understand the social context Wroth writes and to grasp the importance of her protest against oppression in marriage, it is necessary to assess the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in terms of the institution of marriage. Lawrence Stone in his extensive analysis *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* detects a gradual shift from open lineage family to the restricted patriarchal or nuclear family. While in the former the union of the married couple and the children were less important than the wider kinship bonds such as cousinhood, the restricted patriarchal family started to gain more importance in the final decades of the sixteenth century with a focus on the conjugal couple and the inner circle they constitute together with the children rather than the relatives by blood or marriage (124). One of the reasons for this interest in the nuclear family stemmed from the shift in the religious understanding of Reformation in the Church. Contrary to the Catholic belief which was based upon the vow of chastity for the Church community, the matrimonial bond was ideal for the Protestant believers (135). The Catholic Cardinal Bellarmine, for example, thought of marriage as “*a thing humane, virginity is angelical*” while the Protestant William Perkins described it as “*a state in itself far more excellent than the condition of a single life*” (135). In other words, the Protestant belief emphasised the sanctity of marriage and whereas the institution of marriage was initially necessary only to avoid fornication and for legitimate procreation, the third ingredient *spiritual intimacy* came into prominence. Thomas Cranmer, the first Protestant archbishop of Canterbury, in *The Book of Common Prayer*

regarded marriage vital for “*mutual society, help and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and in adversity*” (136) or for Robert Cleaver marriage was a union “*with the good consent of them both, to the end that they may dwell together in friendship and honesty, one helping and comforting the other*” (136). Marriage became a partnership based on mutual love, affection and understanding. Accordingly, the familial influence on the choice of marriage partners decreased towards the end of the sixteenth century and the parental approval on the children’s choices became less indispensable though still much valued. Still, however, the fatherly influence was much stronger in the matchmaking of daughters because they had no option to refuse their paternal choices (Wrightson 49-52).

Nonetheless, it should be noted that even while the opportunity to choose the spouses was developing gradually, marriage “*was not a union for the satisfaction of psychological and physiological needs*” basically but “*an institutional device to ensure the perpetuation of the family and its prosperity*” that foregrounded its “*financial benefits*” (Stone, *Crisis* 613). The relationship between the would-be-couple was of little importance compared to the material gain it would provide. Thus, “*parental pressure was still predominant*” (Stone, *Family* 193) and in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, “*one-third of the older peers were estranged from or actually separated from their wives*” (Stone, *Crisis* 661) because marriages “*deliberately designed to capture an heiress or to cement a political alliance, when the compulsion used may be supposed to have been particularly severe*” (662). Marriage was even more problematic for the daughters because, whatever sects she belonged to, it was the “*destined lot of a girl*” (Kelso 91) and the choice of husband was at the disposal of the fathers, the truth which Vives explained the logic behind: “*true virginity knows nothing of sexual union nor seeks after it . . . therefore . . . the young woman will leave all of that concern to those who wish as much good for her*” (155). The mid-sixteenth century proverb “*there goes more to marriage than four legs in a bed*” (Wrightson 58) was the summary of the outlook on marriage which did not regard physical attraction or mutual affection essential for its successful maintenance.

Since female sexuality was the determiner of a woman’s social status either as a virgin, a wife, a widow or a whore depending on her relationship with men, surveillance of female behaviour was crucial for the production of legitimate children. On the other hand, romantic involvement was not necessary to procreate. James I in *Basilikon Doron* cautioned his son to “*choose your Wife as I advised you to choose your servants . . . For if a man will be careful to breed horses and dogs of good kinds, how much more careful should he be, for the breede of his owne loines*” (36). Similar to any patriarch, he regarded women an instrument for childbearing whose marketable value depends on her procreative

aspect regardless of her thought or feeling. Earlier than James I's reign, in "An Homily of the State of Matrimony" (1562) and in "An Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion" (1570) the religious, cultural and biological inferiority of women was emphasised and her obedience to the husband was advised several times. The famous verse from Genesis 3:16 "*thy desire shall be unto thine husband*" was perpetuated in the aforesaid homilies and in the conduct manuals and, as an important manifestation of social condition, women customarily ended the letters to their husbands as "*your faithful servant and obedient wife*" (Stone, *Family* 198). Plutarch's *Moralia*, a moral text oft-cited in the early modern age, also fortified the identity of wife as inseparable from the husband:

Like as a mirrour or looking glasse garnished with golde and precious stones, serveth to no purpose, if it doe not represent to the life the face of him or her that looketh into it; no more is a woman worth ought (be she otherwise never so rich) unlesse she conforme and frame her self, her life, her maners and conditions suitable in all respects to her husband... even so a wife should have no proper passion or peculiar affection of her owne, but be a partaker of the sports, serious affaires, sad countenance, deepe thoughts and smiling looks of her husband. (qtd. in Wayne 69)

The model Plutarch offered was that of a mirror or a looking glass by which men would assert their omnipotence. In this model, an exemplary wife would be the one who wipes out her wishes and desires for the sake of her husband's and even what she could feel would be decided by her husband. The model called for the annihilation of the wife, as she would be metaphorically dead to her own self. Since she would have to submit to the will of her husband, she would have no individuality of her own but would only be the perpetrator of her husband's desire and command. Not surprisingly, "*in a society where circulation of discourses [was] controlled by men the definition of women [would be] inevitably patriarchal and reductive*" (Belsey 164) and Plutarch's model would be instantly adopted by the patriarchal culture.

As the historical evidence suggests, on the one hand, there was an emphasis on spiritual union but there was a hierarchical relationship between the husband and the wife on the other. The conflicting views regarding the institution of marriage constitute "*an insecure moment in patriarchy*" (43) and their "*plausibility falls into disarray*" (Sinfield, *Faultlines* 45). Such a faultline⁴ or "*the site of*

⁴ The term "faultline" is employed in Cultural Materialism. The theory presumes that no matter how effective any ideology might be, it always produces cracks and contradictions within itself struggling to strengthen its dominance. Sinfield calls these instances of conflict within the ideology faultlines: "*the social order cannot but produce faultlines through which its own criteria of plausibility fall into contest and disarray*" (*Faultlines* 45). He explains the concept with an example: in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona is obliged to her father, the male head of the family, and should marry whom her father chooses but, on the other hand, in the early modern period

profound contradiction” (Sinfield, “Power” 265) within the institution of marriage enables Wroth to explore woman’s place within family and matrimony, the destructive effects of marriage on women and the means to survive it and the patriarchal formation collectively. Wroth “*insists on the woman’s role in negotiating the arrangements*” (Roberts, Critical Introduction lxii) because she takes into consideration the expectations of women as to marriage. She denounces marriage as enthrallment and as masculine violence via several stories in which women are victimised by the tyrannical patriarchs who do not treasure individual desires. Although the prevailing patriarchal power is much stronger than their individual power, the female characters manage to “*disturb the system in violation of parental wishes*” (Sinfield, *Faultlines* 33) and claim agency once they do not readily submit to the dominant culture. Referring to the Elizabethan age, Sinfield claims that “*relations between the stronger and the weak in the household . . . were characterised by personal cruelty and the exercise of autocratic power*” (*Faultlines* 167). In the same vein, the examples below portray an oppressive power structure between the weak daughters and wives and the stronger fathers and husbands. Wroth and her heroines cannot manage to pulverise the patriarchal system yet they manage to raise their voice in the face of patriarchal intervention.

The first example as to the emphasis on female agency and the criticism of patriarchal marital practices takes place between Limena, her father and her husband Philargus. Limena, who is forcibly married to a jealous but wealthy man, embodies the ideal pattern of femininity that prioritises submission to paternal authority over personal aspiration when she dutifully accepts to marry. She reflects the inner struggle between the public self that necessitates dutiful acquiescence and the private self passionately in love with Perissus:

Shee seeing it was her fathers will, esteeming obedience beyond all passions, how worthily soever, suffered; most dutifully, though unwillingly, said, she would obey; her tongue faintly delivering, what her heart so much detested; loathing almost it selfe; yet thus it was concluded, and with as much speed as any man would make to an eternall happines. (1:5)⁵

Limena fulfils the seventeenth century maxim of chaste-silent-obedient on the surface because she does not protest against marriage. However, she remains constant to self-chosen love: “I

there is an emphasis on marriage as a spiritually personal relationship (42-43). This contradiction, “*an insecure moment in patriarchy*” (43) as regards to the ideology of marriage is a faultline and there arises dissidence when Desdemona follows her own will and marries someone she is incompatible with. Even if her act does not make Desdemona an autonomous individual, dissidence takes place considering the social order she belongs to. The quotation from Sinfield clarifies what dissidence is and how it functions: “*My argument is that dissident potential derives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals (though they have qualities) but from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself*” (41).

⁵ Numbering refers to first part page five.

worthily chose you; I lov'd you, and constantly love'd you, and in this doe I best allow of my owne judgment?" (1:10). Even though her physical ownership changes from the father to the husband, her rejecting the spiritual captivity results in violence:

He got a boate, and so passed over to this place, where ever since we have remained; for my part, with daily whippings, and such other tortures, as pinching with irons, and many more terrible . . . Once every day hee brought mee to this pillar where you found me, and in the like manner bound me, then whipt me, after washing the stripes and blisters with salt water: but this had been the last (had not you thus happily arriv'd); for he determined as he said, after my tormenting had been past, in stead of washing me with sea-water, to cast me into her, and so make a finall end of his tormenting, and of my torments. (1:88)

Limena carves a space within marriage immune to patriarchal intervention but it leads to torture by the husband who forces her to confess adultery. The incident is illustrative in several aspects. The detailed description of the torture methods shows the monstrosity of the mismatched husband and the cruelty of the father who forces her to marriage. Even though the patriarchal culture preaches obedience for the maintenance of social order, the episode suggests that filial obedience is not always the solution to ensure order. It, therefore, debunks the so-called benefits of conduct literature to maintain social harmony. That Limena is bounded to a pillar denotes her bondage to patriarchal culture but her heroic endurance against maltreatment asserts her passive resistance in the face of patriarchal oppression. Likewise, even though she becomes an exchangeable commodity between the father and the husband, the psychological/physical torture she endures reinforces her stoic resistance. When she states, "*threatenings are but meanes to strengthen free and pure hearts against the threatners*" (1:12) she shatters the belief that women are fragile and vulnerable. Contrariwise, her temerity against the patriarchal imposition evinces female power. The scars, as embodiments of defiance of the patriarchal authority, register the inviolability of her decisiveness and function as the records of her agency. Limena dissents from the tradition by thwarting the dictum that "*your desire shall be to your husband*" and becomes an agent of her own life when she insists on her own desire. However means he tries, Philargus cannot control his wife upon which his male ego is built. Limena abnegates his existence and embraces her own desire as an autonomous subject. It is noteworthy that she is sympathetically represented while Philargus and the father turn out to be villains and the former dies penitently asking for forgiveness in the end. In the tension between duty and desire, Limena achieves agency by holding onto her soul.

Wroth praises extramarital love and fidelity to a lover rather than a husband so long as it serves for female agency. She both foregrounds the female perspective and provides a critique of a mismatched marriage.

Likewise, in the story of Liana, the father is responsible for the daughter's victimisation because he threatens to disinherit her and imprisons her despite "*his promise, which was, never to force [her] against [her] will, to marry any*" (1:248). Even though Liana loves someone else, her father disregards her wish and demands obedience because he is determined to "*breed*" (1:247) her. The specific choice of the verb underlines the financial benefit she would provide due to new alliances and possible pregnancies instead of paying attention to what she feels because, in the patriarchal marriage market, women are valuable so long as they serve for the patriarchal practices. Liana, however, does not keep silent but defies his authority:

yet tell this my father, his kind commands had more wrought in me, then his cruelty,
yet neither against my loyalty in love; but now so hardned I am against paine, with
use of paine, as all torment, and millions of them added to the rest, shall have no
power to move, the least in my affection to unworthy change, for then should my
soule smart, as onely now body is subject to these torments. (1:250)

Similar to what Limena does, she stands upright against male-inflicted torture. Despite the physical imprisonment, neither the suitor nor the father can spiritually imprison her. She asserts that patriarchal restriction is not an impediment to true love and, by not following what is dictated, she defines herself in accordance with her personal will. In this sense, she displays more active resistance than Limena who silently submits to paternal authority. In any case, their stories go parallel because in each story the authority figure gets penitent of what he has done.⁶ It dampens the apotheosis of male discourse regarding the marital customs and incites women to question what is demanded rather than simple submission and, more importantly, both stories culminate in triumphant agency for women once they unite with their own choices.

Lisia and Orilena are also victimised by patriarchal reasons that imprison them. They are forced to marry because their fathers consider financial benefits over their physical and psychological satisfaction. Lisia's fate is decided by her father who chooses a man of "*churlishness*", a "*dull piece of flesh*" (1:599) as a spouse. She associates marriage with imprisonment when she states she could endure it only "*by hunting and other delights abroad, to away trouble . . . at home*" (1:559). Similarly, Orilena is compelled to marry a wealthy gentleman whom she describes

⁶ Her father accepts that his is "false judgment . . . a shame unto the Judge" (1:255).

as “*the treasure of all bellish properties*” and “*Prince of wickedness*” (1:201). The imprisonment imagery recurs in the episode of Cephalonian lovers: the daughter is “*shut up in a Towre*” (1:43) because she loves another man. Therefore, as not to submit to her father’s command, she elopes with her beloved on the marriage day as she does not accept physical and psychological enthrallment. The beloved is killed by an enemy and the daughter ends up in “*the next Religious house, where shee would remaine till she might follow him*” (1:44). Even though her choice to live in seclusion might be considered another form of imprisonment, the act is significant in that she *on her own* decides the course of her life without patriarchal intervention. The episode interprets intentional reclusion better than marriage, which suffocates women. The examples foreground female experience and highlight the female perspective on marriage as a form of imprisonment.

Heroines engaged in love triangles also reflect female assertiveness. Wroth is sympathetic to the adulteresses because even though these women cannot unite with their beloveds, they maintain their relationship with or loyalty to them (or love). The romance provides sexual freedom to the heroines. For instance, in the story of Laurimello and the Angler Woman, although the Angler Woman is forcibly married by her father, she has a secret relationship with her cousin. The narrator employs the spider imagery to explain the situation she is in: “*which being to crosse from one beame to another, must worke by waies, and goe farre about, making more webs to catch her selfe into her owne purpose, then if she were to goe on ordinary straight course*” (1:293). The analogy to the mythological figure Arachne is obvious: in the Greek myth, Arachne is so excellent in weaving that she challenges Athena’s skill. She is, however, transformed into an insect as a punishment since she questions the authority figure. The Angler Woman, also cognisant of her transgression, challenges the patriarchal authority and associates her condition with a spider. On the other hand, even if what she turns into isolates Arachne from culture, it turns out to be fruitful in the end because she engages in what she enjoys doing most. The Angler Woman is caught in a patriarchal network but she follows her desire even though her transgressive behaviour is likely to conclude in punishment and ostracisation. The weaving metaphor stands for the female voice in her case. Likewise, Lady Pastora is “*married to a Knight, but her affections [are] wedded to her owne choyce*” (1:416). Although her beloved is married as well, it is repeated that marriage does not hinder the marriage of true minds: “*their love (for what love can be kept secret where such barres bee for enjoying) was seene and spoken of by many, yet few blam’d them, but wish’d they were free, and married together*” (1:416). In other words, Lady Pastora’s affair becomes metonymic for her agency. Bellamira is also the victim of arranged marriage and she exerts covert resistance by complying with the rules in appearance. As she states, “*how willingly would I have turned to the other hand: but contrary to my soule I gave my selfe to him,*

my heart to my first love. Thus more then equally I divide my selfe" (1:388). Bellamira does not suffer from physical violence but psychological constraint she endures is apparent. Even if her body is a conduit for male economy, by keeping her soul and body apart, she becomes self-assertive.

As the examples provided above suggest, although the tyrannical patriarchs or conduct manual authors including James I do not take into consideration the female opinion but focus on female body as a means of exchange for patriarchal control, the obvious emphasis on the distinction between body and soul ensures female empowerment for Wroth's heroines. While the female body is trafficable, ownable and masterable, the soul is impossible to possess. Thus, women, who are under the yoke of marriage, embrace their soul both in order to establish agency either in seclusion or by finding a solution to the oppression within marriage and to isolate it from the body employed by men to subjugate women. The female body is detained but the heroines integrate their soul and love that stand for their agency.

On the other hand, it is notable that their action does not ensure subversion of the patriarchal order because, as Greenblatt states, total autonomous selfhood is a myth:

Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artefact. If there remained traces of free choice, the choice was among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated by the social and ideological system in force. (*Self-Fashioning* 256)

In the same vein, the heroines cannot transcend the social forces which mould them into a patriarchally acceptable form. In other words, they still remain within the boundaries of the patriarchal system and the most autonomous choice they make is still as far as the social forces offer. Nonetheless, their action turns out to be a voice of protest and rebellion because much as they cannot always completely overcome oppression in the marital issues nor are they contained by its practices but even the articulation of the misdeeds of the patriarchal figures, their disavowal of and resistance against the patriarchal practices amplify their voice. In spite of their inability to become totally autonomous heroines, "*dissident potential derives ultimately not . . . from conflict and contradiction*" (41) which preaches mutual affection and submission to the patriarchs simultaneously and, when the heroines refuse to "*identify*" their "*interests with the dominant*" (Sinfield, *Faultlines* 42) there inevitably occurs disturbances thanks to which they assert their agency.

Through the afore-mentioned stories, *Urania* criticises fathers' "*cruel and tyrannical power over their children*" (1:43) and portrays the means women subvert their authority in order to assert individual will. It condemns paternal inconsiderateness and helps the subordinate claim their existence. Instead of meekness and silence, the muted half of the patriarchal system is given the chance to express the difficulties they face. Wroth emphasises that a woman should choose her partner without paternal intervention. As Andrea states, she "*valorizes a woman's freely chosen love (whether adulterous or not) over the inescapable constraints of aristocratic patriarchal marriage*" (337) and whenever marriage encumbers true love, extramarital love becomes rightful. Wroth sympathises with extramarital love because the patriarchal custom denies the means to forge subjectivity. It is not the victimised wives and daughters to blame but the patriarchal culture because if women were given the chance to fulfil their wishes, they would not cuckold their husbands or would look for alternatives to transcend fatherly authority. In this sense, *Urania* is a critique of patriarchal marital practices which lead women to transgressive behaviour. It foregrounds the conflict between the dominant and the subordinate and the resistance strategies women develop. Krontiris considers it "*a guide on how to thwart paternal authority*" (128) because Wroth's heroines are no longer voiceless objects but articulate subjects of their individual desires. Even though they do not have total control of their lives, they carve space for themselves under the parochial social circumstances.

The criticism of the repressive context of marriage is further emphasised through heroines who do not consider marriage the only option but remain single. These women also represent the agency as they reject male custody. For example, Alarina changes her name to Silviana after her lover abandons her. Through renaming, she refashions her identity and her decision to "*wed [her] selfe to chast Dianas life*" (1:217) completely renounces the former identity defined by her relationship to a man. Silviana indicates that marriage is not the only destiny a woman has to embrace. Her statement "*I love my selfe, my selfe loveth me*" (1:224) is the highest degree one can achieve because she even rejects commitment to her self-chosen love. She becomes "*[m]istrisse of [her] thoughts, and freedoms rule*" (1:224) and establishes an autonomous, self-sufficient position. Likewise, the nymph Mirasilva lives alone in the forest after being abandoned by Sildurino (1:577); the Lady of Robollo resides in an isolated castle after the death of her betrothed (2:149). These characters take the vow of celibacy and govern their own territory. The ownership of the land refers to the ownership of their bodies and the places they live become the feminised space in which they relinquish their feminine duties. The voluntary reclusion endows them with a position of authority previously denied by men. In sum, one of the characters, Fancy, also on behalf of all oppressed women, recounts why she rejects all suitors because marriage would be

“*too strict a busines for [her] to undergoe*” as “*the bondage to sweet freedome*” (2:38). She thinks the husband would strictly control her:

My man will say, “Why how now, wher had you thes things? Who gave them you?”
This I like not . . . Thes things can nott bee given for any good butt to abuse mee . . .
therfor never will I marry . . . Noe, libertie and good company are my chosen mates.
(2:38)

Fancy imagines a companionate match with “*hansome discourse with a reasonable husband, children to pass away the time*” (2:38) but, even as her name indicates, it is only a fancy for the seventeenth-century women.

On the other hand, *Urania* does not only represent mismatched marriages, tyrannical fathers or violent husbands but also offers examples based on companionate relationship. It envisions a better world in which marriage is based upon mutual affection and sanctified by the parents. Dollimore avers that “*subjectivity*” emerges when the dominant culture is “*under pressure of contradictions*” (“Shakespeare” 482). In this sense, the faultline regarding the cultural appreciation of the institution of marriage ensures the appearance of emergent subjectivities such as articulate women who strive for their freedom and who question the patriarchal practices, the development of new relationships between the figures of authority and female figures, new practices which are not based upon the understanding of women as an exchangeable commodity and new values such as companionate marriages that cherish individual opinion over the patriarchal tradition. The couples who undergo various difficulties but end up triumphant in marriage such as Veralinda and Leonius, Limena and Perissus, Liana and Alanus, Orilena and Philarchos, Dalinea and Parselius, Urania and Steriamus, Philistella and Selarinus and Melasinda and Ollarandus provide an ideal for the institution of marriage in which free choice, personal desire and mutual affection between couples are taken into consideration because a woman is “*not Marchandise, nor to bee gaind that way, but her love [is] free, and freely should be given*” (1:478). Through myriad examples, *Urania* displays female perception of love, choices, motives, heroism and endurance to foreground the female voice subordinated by the male hegemony in a patriarchal context which dictates “*Lord the husband [and the father] in all estates from Shepheardes unto Kings*” (1:343). By juxtaposing romantic relationships with arranged marriages, the romance urges women to fight against hardships. The portrayal of female experience is significant because women who refuse subjugation and resist patriarchal control threaten the social order and the orthodox dictum of obedience; those who seek to control their marital and sexual choices in order to claim agency

over their lives despite parental coercion, physical violence and psychological torture occupy a subject position through self-assertion. To emphasise the female quest for the agency, Wroth “*affirms resilience rather than victimisation of the female character*” (Miller, “Engendering” 158). If “*subcultures constitute consciousness*” what should be done is to “*validate the individual*” to increase the “*potential resources of collective understanding and resistance*” (Sinfield, *Faultlines* 38). This is what Wroth and her heroines instil. Pamphilia poetically sums up the discussion on the importance of reciprocal love:

Love is onely to be gained by love equally bestowed, the giver, and receiver reciprocally liberal, else it is no love; nor can this be, but were affections meete; and that we must not all expect, nor can it reasonably bee demanded. (1:94)

Pamphilia has a substantial place in the romance among other female characters. The protagonist of the work, her prominent characteristic is her love for Amphilanthus while she also holds the positions of authorship and queenship. Much as she remains loyal to his love throughout the romance, Pamphilia is not a victim of unrequited love but it helps her become a skilled poet by which she earns agency. She not only manages to fulfil her duties towards the state but also illustrates the healing side of self-expression and female solidarity. An analysis of Pamphilia and her motives demonstrate how she becomes an agent of her life within the patriarchal culture, how she goes against patriarchal matrimonial practices and how her marriage offers an innovative solution to then-current male-female relationships.

Leandrus’ courtship with Pamphilia and her rejecting the marriage proposal build up her character in the first place. Leandrus describes love as “*a cureles wound by the never fayling commanding eyes of Pamphilia*” (1:101) and, in their first encounter, Pamphilia’s eyes constitute dominance over Leandrus. The scene recalls the traditional Petrarchan topos in which the male lover suffers from the cruelty of the distant lady who is mute so that the male could voice his desire but the present episode does not silence the female voice. Leandrus becomes functional in demonstrating Pamphilia’s agency because when he proposes marriage, he turns out to be the mouthpiece of the cultural mores since he assumes Pamphilia would need male protection: “*is it possible (most excellling Queene) that such a spirit, and so great a Princesse, should be thus alone, and adventure without guard?*” (1:213). Pamphilia’s answer contrasts the silent and submissive female image once she states she does not need someone to protect her because she is capable of taking care of herself: “*my spirit my Lord, said she, as well guards me alone, as in company; and for my person, my greatnesse, and these walls are sufficient warrants, and guardians for my safety*” (1:213). Pamphilia trusts in her soul in order to be self-

sufficient. However, Leandrus tries to persuade her: “*yet your safety might bee more,’ said hee, ‘if joynd with one, who might defend you upon all occasions, both with his love and strength, while these dull walls can only incompasse you”* (1:213). Ironically enough, Wroth makes Leandrus foreground the female perspective because both for Pamphilia and several heroines, the dull walls are, indeed, the representatives of the jealous and stagnant husbands/fathers who suffocate their wives/daughters under the pretence of protection. For this reason, Pamphilia does not accept the proposal because she does not accede to the enslavement it would bring given that she is in love with someone else and she believes in her inner strength to protect herself in case of danger. Pamphilia thus establishes her agency. What is more, she reinforces it when she cunningly postpones the final decision. She manipulates the patriarchal formation and appropriates the conventional code of conduct:

I cannot but thanke you for your princely offer; but it must bee my fathers liking, with the consent of my nearest and dearest friends that can set any other Crowne on my head, then that which my people have already settled there; and the consent of so great a people, and so loving to me, must not be neglected; what vertues are in me, shall appeare through the obedience I owe, and will pay to his Majesty, and the rest: therefore I am altogether unable to give you satisfaction any further then this. (1:214)

Pamphilia exploits the custom of arranged marriage in which the father is the sole decision maker. She seems to obey the patriarchal prescription when she directs Leandrus to ask the father’s consent but she employs a clever manoeuvre to delay the decision. Even though the act ostensibly lessens her agency, it works for her interest in that when she declines the proposal once more in front of her father, she strengthens her autonomous stature considering that the father is higher than a suitor in the patriarchal rank. The father’s attitude is worthy of attention:

After dinner the King call’d his daughter Pamphilia to him, telling her what an earnest suiter Leandrus was to him for his consent to have her in marriage, which he liked very well of, considering his worth, and the fitnessse of his estate, alleaging all the reasons that a wise and carefull father could make unto himself, or perswade with, to a beloved daughter. (1:262)

The King of Morea is not coercive but he wisely considers the good qualities Leandrus has. Instead of compelling Pamphilia to an unwanted marriage, he counsels her.⁷ He assures of her

⁷ Likewise, when Rodomandro asks his consent, he states it is valid only if Pamphilia accepts the proposal: “*The King . . . gave his consent, butt thus, if she liked; other ways his consent (beeing but to her owne content) must stand fruitles . . . since without her liking bee would nott*

agency and freedom of choice when he states “*he would not force her to any thing against her mind*” (1:263). The relationship is not based on the hierarchical one of the dutiful daughter and the authoritative father but on the exchange of opinions and mutual understanding. The father figure is distinctive of the age and their dialogue represents a new practice which flourishes between the father and the daughter. Thereby, *Urania* does not only criticise the tyrannical patriarchs but offers a better model to follow. Pamphilia neglects his counsel too:

That all those things his Majesty had said, she confessed to be true, and that he was worthy of the greatest fortune the world had in a wife: but his Majestie had once married her before, which was to the Kingdom of Pamphilia, from which Husband shee could not be divorced, nor ever would have other, if it might please him to give her leave to enjoy that happinesse; and besides, besought his permission, “for my Lord,” said shee, “my people looke for me, and I must needs be with them.” (1:262)

Pamphilia declines Leandrus’ proposal also in front of her father when she states she has already been married to her state, which fortifies her authoritative position. She alludes to Queen Elizabeth I as an emblem of the impregnability of individual will. What is more, the narrative establishes an intergenerational bond with Queen Elizabeth I who, in her speech “The Second Version of the Speech Concerning the Queene’s Marriage,” rehearses the similar idea: “*Yea, to satisfie you, I have already joyned my selfe in Marriage to an Husband, namely, the King of England. And behold which I marvell ye have forgotten, the Pledge of this my Wedlock and Marriage with my Kingdom*” (117). The Queen privileges her responsibility for the state and the people over her marital concerns. Pamphilia employs the same strategy in order to ensure independence. The narrative builds Pamphilia after Queen Elizabeth I and justifies her agency. By fashioning an identity who acts as a “*speaking subject in relation to Elizabeth’s feminisation of the monarch’s position*” (Miller, *Changing* 113) The Leandrus episode and the incidents that follow are important in several aspects. The father-daughter relationship dissents from the traditional structure and the King of Morea represents a solution to the tyrannical parents who disrespect filial choice. Both the father and the daughter reject blind obedience to the patriarchal prescriptions as to marital affairs and evaluate the situation individually based on healthy communication. Pamphilia resists the patriarchal custom of arranged marriage and shows that wifhood does not necessarily define ideal womanhood.

have had her to wronge her self, contrary to her affection, to bee forced, since force can never bee companionated with love” (2:270). The Lady of Robollo’s father is also an affectionate father who does not force her into an unwanted choice although it is his last wish to see her daughter married: “*my father . . . onely asked mee if I liked of itt, hee would never constraine mee*” (2:150).

Thus, she exerts her will to define her identity outside the institution of marriage and offers a covert critique of marital practices.

Pamphilia produces her work either in nature or in her chamber. Even though the conduct literature confines women into domestic place and Pamphilia retreats into private space, she furnishes it subversively and creates a feminised space helpful for self-expression: in her room, she “*taking a little Cabinet with her, wherein she had many papers, and setting a light by her, began to reade them, but few of them pleasing her, she took pen and paper, and being excellent in writing, writ these verses*” (1:62). The private chamber separates her from the impositions of the patriarchal culture that compels women to get married and procreate. It empowers her agency as a woman and as a poet since she can construct/reveal her identity without patriarchal interference. Interestingly enough, when the suitor Rodomandro proposes, she appears surrounded by her books and papers: “*then hee went to her whom he found alone, onely boockes about her, which she ever extreamly loved and she writing*” (2:270). Her studies separate Pamphilia from the patriarchal culture but Rodomandro -who embodies it- intervenes to mold her into a socially assigned role. However, it is remarkable that although he persuades her to marriage, Rodomandro offers an ideal union which counts on respect and liberty rather than a hierarchical relationship. Rodomandro, remindful of Pamphilia’s father who does not blindly stick to patriarchal rules, removes the patriarchal dictum that silences women in marriage: “*nor seeke I soverainitie over love, as that way to master, butt to bee a meanes for mee, poore mee, to bee accepted and receaved by you*” (2:271). He promises to provide her with privacy:

Love your booke, butt love mee soe farr as that I may hold itt to you that while you peruse that, I may Joye in beeholding you and som times gaine a looke from you if but to chide mee for soe carelessly performing my office . . . Bee solitarie, yet favour mee so much as that I may butt attend you . . . I will keepe att what distance you please, butt still in your sight, els how shall I serve you? (2:272)

It is notable that Rodomandro provides the secure space within the matrimonial bond. He represents a form of marriage ahead of his time based on mutual understanding and support in which the husband does not force the wife to obedience but supports the freedom for her inner quest. Wroth, who criticises the custom of arranged marriages through several stories, presents an ideal marriage based on the union between two *equal* people. Their marriage represents an ideal male-female relationship which does not depend on hierarchy but equality as “*youke fellows, noe superior, nor commanding power but in love betweene united harts*” (2:381). In spite of her new social status, Pamphilia remains an individual because she remains loyal to her self-chosen love; she

continues her reading and writing activities to express herself; she does not fall under the hegemony of her father; she postpones marriage as much as possible; when she marries, she does not get involved in the marriage market but selects her partner individually; she challenges the institutional structure of marriage based on the inequality of sexes; and, although her association with Queen Elizabeth I immediately empowers her, the combination of two roles as a woman passionately in love and as a responsible female monarch renders her more potent a woman than her predecessor. Pamphilia always remains a “subject to her self” (Masten 78) whose several roles secure her agency and independence.

3. Conclusion

Although Wroth cannot force a considerable shift in the patriarchal system, considering the oppressive patriarchal context in which she produces *Urania*, her courage to criticise the marital practices is quite worthy of attention. It should be noted that even if Wroth constructs a critique as to how women are treated within the framework of marriage customs, she does not argue for the abolition of the institution of marriage. Instead, she foregrounds female expression, reflects the tension women undergo as to their private self and public duty and challenges the gendered system that assigns women to subordinate roles. She responds to the cultural constraints through portrayal of heroines uncircumscribed by their social milieu. The stories the heroines experience grant them agency and, instead of focusing on female victimisation, they eventuate in female self-assertion. The heroines end up triumphant when they unite with their beloved; when they completely object to arranged marriage; when they endure physical and psychological torture; when they balance inner turmoil with public pressure; when they follow their desire once married; or when they never get married. Although independence from patriarchal interference becomes impossible at times, the heroines still manage to better their condition within the present order. Wroth’s heroines are not defiant enough to pursue sexual desire but female heroism and the will to self-determination stand for the resolution to be the agents of their acts. The heroines dissent from the maxim of chaste-silent-obedient and refashion themselves against the seventeenth-century parameters. These articulate subjects question the stereotypical understanding of femininity and forge idiosyncratic identities. Thus, the heroines challenge the hierarchical patriarchal culture and create gender confusion that threatens the social order. In a social context in which the acceptable female behaviour extends as far as the patriarchal figures approve, Wroth saves women from the subordinate and silent position they are compelled to occupy. *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* becomes a “site of struggle” (Dollimore, *Radical* li) in

which the marginalised women of the patriarchal seventeenth-century culture become the protagonists.

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