THE FIRST PART OF

The Countess of Montgomery's Urania

by

Lady Mary Wroth

Edited by

Josephine A. Roberts

Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies
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Critical Introduction

Lady Mary Wroth composed her prose romance *Urania* at the height of the Jacobean debates concerning the nature and status of women. The following letter by John Chamberlain conveys a glimpse of the debate as it raged in the court and streets of London in the 1620s:

> Our pulpits ring continually of the insolence and impudence of women: and to helpe the matter forward the players have likewise taken them to taske, and so to the ballades and ballad-singers, so that they can come no where but theyre eares tingle: and yf all this will not serve the King threatens to fall upon theyre husbands, parents, or frends that have or shold have powre over them and make them pay for yt.[1]

Chamberlain is alluding in part to James I's order to the Bishop of London that the clergy should "inveigh vehemently and bitterly in theyre sermons against the insolencie of our women" and condemn from the pulpits the practice of cross-dressing (2:286). Sharing many of the king's attitudes toward women, Chamberlain vividly records the intensity and virulence of the antifeminist reaction.

It is no surprise that he identifies the king so closely as a spokesman for misogyny. James' surviving writings, including "A Satire against Woemen," reveal a scarcely veiled contempt.[2] Chamberlain had earlier observed that "the King is in a great vaine of taking down highhanded women" (2:216). The French ambassador Beaumont offered a similar view:

> He piques himself on great contempt for women. They are obliged to kneel before him when they are presented, he exorts them openly to virtue, and scoffs with great levity at men who pay them honour. You may easily conceive that the English

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[1] *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. Norman E. McClure, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1939), 2:289 (Feb. 12, 1620). All dates are new style.

[2] For James' verse satire, see Allan F. Westcott, *New Poems by James I of England* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1911), 19–21. On James' attitude toward women, see Maurice Lee, Jr., *Great Britain's Solomon: James VI and I in His Three Kingdoms* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1990), 142–43.

> ladies do not spare him but hold him in abhorrence and tear him to pieces with their tongues, each according to her humour.[3]

The outpouring of pamphlets and sermons, books of instruction and divine counsel, can be seen partly as a backlash against larger social movements already at work in the early seventeenth century as the pattern of arranged marriages, by which upper-class parents consolidated wealth and power, slowly gave way to a more companionate model.[4] Lawrence Stone has estimated that in the 1620s nearly one third of the older peerage was in serious marital difficulties. In a nation where formal divorce occurred only in a very few highly publicized cases, the rest of society was left to its own devices to resolve situations of marital dispute and incompatibility. Women were in a particularly vulnerable position because they could and did expect financial support in the event of separation, but receiving it often depended upon the whim of the husband, as the case of Elizabeth Cary, viscountess Falkland, demonstrates.[5]

Personal experiences, her own and those of her friends, had made Wroth very much aware of how little voice women had in determining their own destinies or even choosing their life partners. *Urania*'s vast panorama of women characters differs greatly in their willingness to conform to society's norms, to challenge patriarchal authority, or to construct new relationships along unorthodox lines. Including more than three hundred characters, Wroth's work is extraordinary not simply because of its size or the fact that it is the first known original prose fiction by an Englishwoman. In transgressing the traditional boundaries that restricted women writers to translation and religious meditation, Wroth ventured into a territory that offered rich possibilities for women to reshape Jacobean culture by addressing and representing it.

Wroth's romance consists of two parts: the first was published in 1621, and the second survives in a unique holograph manuscript at the New-

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[3] Cited in D. Harris Willson, *King James VI and I* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 196.

[4] See Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family, 1450–1700* (London: Longman, 1984); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977); and Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580–1680* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1982).

[5] Stone, "Marriage Among the English Nobility in the 16th and 17th Centuries," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3 (1961), 202. In the event of proven adultery, a wife could be left penniless: see Stone, *Road to Divorce, England 1530–1987* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 193. Elizabeth Cary sent letters to Charles I and Secretary Conway pleading for some form of financial settlement: *The Lady Falkland: Her Life from a MS. in the Emperiall Archives at Lille*, ed. R[ichard] S[impson] (London: Catholic Publishing & Bookselling Company, Ltd., 1861), 144–46, 148–51.

berry Library, Chicago (Case MSfY 1565.W95). Wroth probably began writing the first part between 1618 and 1620. She may have started writing *Urania* shortly after the publication of one of her primary sources: Anthony Munday's English version of *Amadis de Gaule* (based on Nicholas de Herberay's French translation), which appeared in four volumes in 1618–1619. Dedicated to Philip Herbert, earl of Montgomery, the first volume mentions his wife, Susan Herbert, as the source of the editions Munday used: "But by the helpe of that worthy Lady, I have had such Bookes as were of the best editions, and them (as I have already begun) I intend to follow."[6] Munday concludes by apologizing for any errors of translation on the grounds that he completed his work at "the urgent importunitie of that worthy Lady, by whom I have thus boldly presumed" (sig. A2^{v}). In his translation of the third book of *Amadis* he repeats his claim that the work was done at Susan's "earnest" request and refers to his "promise to that most Noble Ladie to have published the whole first five volumes together" (sig. A2–A2^{v}). Although Wroth knew French and could have read Herberay's text, the easy availability of the English translation enabled her to read (or re-read) a work that inspired a number of key episodes in *Urania*, including the Throne of Love at the beginning of the romance. Wroth must have completed the first part by July 13, 1621, when it was entered in the Stationers' Register.

The second part, the Newberry manuscript, is far more difficult to date because it was written over a longer period of time, as revealed by the use of different ink, pens, and paper (the physical evidence of the manuscript will be discussed in Volume Two). A date can be approximated by an internal reference at the beginning of the text: the account of the death of Philistella of "a feaver in child bed" (I, fol. 1). The episode probably adverts to the death of Wroth's younger sister Philip in September, 1620, an event which deeply touched the entire Sidney family.[7] By contrast, there is no chronologically specific evidence as to when Wroth finished writing the manuscript because the text of the second volume simply ends in mid-sentence in the midst of the quest by a young knight, known as the

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[6] The four volumes of *Amadis* were published by Nicholas Okes: *The Ancient, Famous, and Honourable History of Amadis de Gaule. Discoursing the Adventures, Loves, and Fortunes of many Princes, Knights, and Ladies* (London, 1618); *The Second Booke of Amadis de Gaule, Containing the Description, Wonders and Conquests of the Inclosed or Firme-Island* (London, 1619); *The Third Booke of Amadis de Gaule, Containing the Discords and Warres Which Befell in Great Brittaine* (London, 1618); *The Fourth Booke of Amadis de Gaule, Wherin is Amply Declared, what end and success the Warre had, begun betweene King Lisuart, and the Knights of the Enclosed Isle* (London, 1618).

[7] See the discussion of Lady Philip Sidney in Personal Contexts, below.

Fair Designe, to find Amphilanthus. The narrator strongly hints that the Fair Designe is Amphilanthus' natural son, and the enchantment can end only when his father is recovered. The passage, which can be read as a metafictional comment on the *Urania* itself, is open to multiple interpretations. In 1626, William Herbert, third earl of Pembroke, ruled out the possibility of acknowledging his natural son by Wroth as his heir when he designated his seven-year-old nephew Philip as the recipient of his lands, and so it is unlikely that the manuscript was written after this date. By 1629, the dedicatee of *Urania*, Susan Herbert, countess of Montgomery, had died of smallpox.

Literary Contexts

Romance as a literary form had longstanding medieval associations with women, often for negative reasons. As Patricia Parker observes, the digressiveness of the genre was linked to the supposed garrulity and irrationality of women and to the seductive power of female desire. Although predominantly written by men, romances often inscribed a female audience, even when the male author might simultaneously be addressing the members of his own sex.[1] In the case of Wroth's fiction there are no internal addresses to "fair ladies" (as in Sidney's *Old Arcadia*), but the full title of the work inscribes one of its ideal readers: *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*. As we have seen, Susan Herbert had a strong interest in prose fiction, especially continental romances. She and her husband were the dedicatees of a number of works, including the translations of *Amadis* (1618–19) and Honoré d'Urfé's *Astrée* (1620). Frequently the translators acknowledge Susan as a primary patron, for Philip had relatively little interest in fiction.[2] One unpublished romance, John Reynolds of Exeter's *Loves Laurell*

[1] Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: Methuen, 1987), 10–11. For an account of how the female audience is inscribed in Elizabethan romances written by men, see Caroline Lucas, *Writing for Women: The Example of Woman as Reader in Elizabethan Romance* (Milton Keynes: Open Univ. Press, 1989).

[2] See Michael Brennan's discussion of Susan and Philip Herbert as patrons: *Literary Patronage in the English Renaissance: The Pembroke Family* (London: Routledge, 1988), 120, 157. Philip Herbert's biographer, the earl of Clarendon, claimed scornfully that he "pretended to no other qualifications than to understand horses and dogs very well." *History of the Rebellion*, ed. W. Dunn Macray, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1888), 1:74. John Aubrey noted of Philip that he "did not delight in Books or Poetry: but exceedingly loved Painting and Building." *Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949), 146. Yet Philip did leave written comments