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CONSTANCY AND PUNISHMENT: GENDER AND  
THE VIRTUE OF CONSTANCY IN EARLY MODERN  
PROSE ROMANCE

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty  
of  
Purdue University  
by  
Nancy K. Kerns

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of  
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## ABSTRACT

Kerns, Nancy K. Ph.D., Purdue University, August 2008. *Constancy and Punishment: Gender and the Virtue of Constancy in the Early Modern Prose Romance*. Major Professor: Clayton Lein.

I theorize that constancy is a fundamental element of the power relationships between men and women in the Renaissance. A man who is constant to one woman gives her a degree of power over his sexuality, which goes against the Early Modern idea that a man must own the woman's sexuality in order to fulfill his gender role. As a result, while women were expected to be constant, males were given more leeway in this arena. However, a male Early Modern writer interested in portraying virtue could not condone adultery; he was expected to elevate constancy in both the man and the woman. I argue that the conflict between the need to protect masculine power and the need to present a virtuous hero creates an underlying ambivalence about male constancy that peeks through in the male-authored prose romances of the period. While I use Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* as my example of this, I see a pattern of it from the beginnings of the romance genre: the heroes, despite their constancy, suffer humiliations and feminization before obtaining the woman. I contrast this with two Early Modern prose romances written by women: Mary Wroth's *Urania* and Anna Weamys's *Continuation*. I argue that in these works, only the inconstant suffer such humiliations and punishments; there is no ambivalence. The women writers embrace

constancy in both the male and the female; indeed, they make the virtue central to their definitions of masculinity and femininity.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The trope of the constant man who is a fool for love was not new in Early Modern times, nor was the trope of the inconstant man who, despite his love for a virtuous woman, cannot seem to remain faithful to her. We find seductive sorceresses in classical works such as the *Odyssey* who are intent upon luring Odysseus away from his constant Penelope. In the late medieval period, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* gives us the figure of Lancelot, constant to his beloved Guinevere in spirit but still tricked into another woman's bed. Even the concept of courtly love, with its professed masculine enslavement to one true and constant woman, both celebrates and recoils from the virtue of constancy in that the male figure is incessantly suffering due to his constancy to an unattainable woman.

The emergence of the epic romance genre in Italy expanded upon these themes, going further with the humiliations suffered by heroes in their quests for love. Since love is a centerpiece of the romance, constancy to that love is naturally a continuing theme. Despite this, we see authors portray constant men as mentally deficient even as they fight for the noble cause of love. Boiardo's Orlando, while remaining noble, makes himself ridiculous for the love of Angelica in *Orlando Innamorato*. His character fares no better in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The pattern of the constant man's degradation in the name

of love appears regularly in male-authored prose romance, and the tradition continued in England.

Cultural definitions of gender in Early Modern England categorized excessive emotion and loss of control as feminine, adding a new layer of anxiety about passion and sexuality. By contrast, gender norms masculinized the exercise of reason and self-control (Fletcher 56). Such delineations made male constancy in romantic heroes even more problematic. To men struggling with the dangers of passion to self-control and attempting to define the boundaries of heteronormativity, devotion to one woman signified sexual dependency on that woman. Such dependency took away from the man's masculine identity, as male control over female sexuality was essential to manhood (Foyster 41-42). A romantic hero must possess undying passion for his true love, but by Early Modern standards, such passion was on the razor's edge of emasculation.

Due to the gender instability inherent in the genre, ambivalence about male constancy in English Early Modern prose romance is unsurprising. While authors such as Sidney argue convincingly that they want to use their romances to "teach" as well as "delight" (*Defense of Poesy* 1), a discomfort with the virtue of romantic constancy in males emerges nonetheless. This discomfort manifests itself in the deterioration of the male hero when love consumes him; yet, he still must prevail and return as a force of masculinity. Male authors attempted to negotiate that complex problem by creating love interests that are perfect or nearly perfect, such as Una and Gloriana in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. These women would therefore be a rational choice and legitimize the degradations of the hero in the name of love. Even so, the behaviors of the hero stray from such a clear-cut balance of passion and reason. Even the Redcrosse Knight is unable

to fully command himself in episodes such as his victimization at the hands of the sorceress Duessa.

Sidney's *Arcadia* exhibits similar ambivalence. The princes Pyrocles and Musidorus are the heroes, and they debase themselves to win the hearts of the women whom they love. Sidney brings low other male characters as well, as I shall show. These men do eventually achieve a happy ending through their trials, but the very fact that they humiliate themselves in the name of constancy demonstrates the paradox.

Mary Wroth and Anna Weamys, the first two female authors of prose romance in the English language (Travitsky 259), take a very different approach towards constancy. They reward it without qualification. Their constant men do not undergo humiliations or feminization. Their constant women are models of behavior for both genders rather than simply exemplary representations of femininity. In these works, constancy is a defining trait for both masculine and feminine gender behaviors. Wroth and Weamys create a fantasy where men and women derive the hallmarks of their gender identities from a single unifying principle: constancy.

In this dissertation, I use the prose romances of Philip Sidney, Mary Wroth, and Anna Weamys to analyze the different ways male and female Early Modern writers represented constancy and its role in gender relations. I argue that the main reason for women's different attitudes towards constancy is that it was stereotypically a virtue associated with women. If a woman could define gender behavior as dependent upon constancy, she could level the playing field with men. In fact, she could even have an advantage. Additionally, a woman who was able to keep a constant man loyal to her enjoyed a power over him that could lead to increased stability in many other areas of her

life, such as financial security, social status, and even personal health – a straying man could pick up diseases, after all. Even an inconstant man who continues his financial responsibilities may embarrass and endanger his wife (or mistress).

My second chapter, centering on Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1593), examines three of the relationships of the romance and the ways in which they betray an underlying ambivalence towards male constancy even as Sidney extols constancy as a virtue. I highlight the complicated relationships between Pyrocles and Philoclea, Musidorus and Pamela, and Argalus and Parthenia. Sidney's dealings with females who ignore gender norms, such as the original Zelmane and the foolish Erona, offer a counterpoint. Their tales end unhappily. When Parthenia strays from the female norms, her story also comes to a tragic end.

The next three chapters are devoted to Mary Wroth's *The First and Second Parts of the Countess of Montgomery's Urania* because I feel the extent of her prose romance deserves a more thorough treatment than most scholars have given it. While a good amount of scholarly work exists on Wroth's poetry, critics have paid far less attention to her prose work *Urania* and its wealth of characters and plots. The scholarship on Wroth is a relatively recent development, accelerating in the 1990s with Josephine Roberts's republications of the works. Two decades of scholarship can hardly compete with the centuries of criticism devoted to Sidney's material. Therefore, I feel it is legitimate to cover *Urania* in more depth. An examination of Wroth's work, especially in conjunction with Sidney's and other male authors of the time, is essential in gaining an alternate perspective on the prose romance. We must listen to the voices of women as well as men

if we wish to gain a more accurate understanding of Early Modern gender relations and greater societal issues.

As a widow in love with a married man and the mother of two illegitimate children, Wroth already lived outside of social mores. She also had a great deal of experience with inconstancy in her relationship with her lover, the Earl of Pembroke. Such life experiences undoubtedly informed the importance she placed upon constancy in her works. In *Urania*, Wroth not only unconditionally rewards constancy, she makes it the center of her gender paradigm and the main virtue in her definition of heteronormative masculinity. She defines constancy as loyalty to one's true love, even if these lovers are not legitimized through marriage. She bases her judgments of characters on whether or not they are successfully constant in their love relationships, and that judgment extends to their performance of gender. In the same way, her plots continually reinforce the centrality of constancy through their repeated demonstrations of the degradations and subsequent redemptions of inconstant heroes and heroines.

My third chapter focuses on *The First Part of the Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621) and its establishment of constancy as the defining trait of both masculinity and femininity. In stories of suffering and redemption, Wroth offers a portrait of men who fail in their constancy and thus lose their gender identities until they reclaim constancy and re-establish their masculinity. I demonstrate this theory through her treatment of two love triangles: Urania, Parselius, and Dalinea, as well as Pamphilia, Amphilanthus, and Lucenia. In both, the male undergoes a period of insanity and feminization before returning to himself with a denunciation of his inconstancy and

repentant behavior. Only after this purgation of his inconstancy can he fulfill his proper gender role.

In my fourth chapter, I will deal with the more menacing tone of *The Second Part of the Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (c. 1640), and investigate how Wroth's dying hopes for the legitimate recognition of her children create an atmosphere which focuses on the punishment of the inconstant lover. Once again, Amphilanthus loses his sense of self and masculinity due to inconstancy; however, the degradations he endures exceed those of *Part One*. Likewise Selarinus, a lesser character but still a heroic figure, becomes a victim of prolonged sexual abuse due to his inconstancy. While both men escape their sufferings, the darker tone of their treatments is indicative of Wroth's change in situation.

The fifth chapter, and final chapter on Wroth's *Urania*, focuses on female constancy. I examine the ways in which Wroth not only establishes constancy as central to femininity, but also the ways in which her villainesses defy constancy and escape punishment. This differentiation of their treatment from the treatment of inconstant males reveals a counterpoint to the ambivalence towards male constancy found in male-authored prose romance. The unabashedly inconstant villainesses enact their own rebellion against the limitations of gender and seek empowerment without concern for love relationships. They are condemned by Wroth in her narrative, but remain unpunished – quite a departure from the unhappy endings of such characters in male-authored romance. Wroth's authorial choices, in this case, speak louder than her narrator's words.

My final chapter explores the relatively uncharted territory of Anna Weamys's *Continuation of Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia* (1651), a work and an author which have heretofore received remarkably little critical attention. Weamys was a young woman writing in a time of political turmoil, the daughter of a Royalist sympathizer during the Interregnum. Weamys expressly builds her *Continuation* upon Sidney's *Arcadia*, but she makes subtle changes that indicate a fundamental difference in attitude regarding constancy. Weamys is closer to Wroth than Sidney in reducing ambivalence. Instead, she creates a balance between birthright and moral strength to legitimize political constancy, even in such turbulent political times. Her fantasy extols political constancy to a wise ruler and makes it a fundamental part of gender-appropriate behavior in both men and women. The inclusion of the element of moral strength differentiates her from those who would argue that birthright takes precedence in the observance of royalty. Additionally, the inclusion of morality combines unifying ideas from the various Reformist and Royalist camps, disparate as they were within themselves.<sup>1</sup> In her fantasy, constancy is both a political and romantic equalizer.

Through a delineation of the differences between the treatment of constancy in these works, we can determine a theoretical definition of the female-authored romance that separates it from male-authored romance. This type of delineation does more than highlight the viewpoint of women; it offers a more nuanced picture of the male viewpoint as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Defining "Reformist" and "Royalist" ideals is extremely difficult due to the variety of thought within each camp; I attempt to focus on the most broadly held viewpoints.

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CHAPTER 2. THE AMBIVALENCE OF CONSTANCY IN PHILIP SIDNEY'S  
*ARCADIA*

“Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word [Greek], that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end,—to teach and delight.” – Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*.

When Sidney wrote the *Arcadia*, he was mindful of what he considered his duty as an author towards readers, whether that reader be the Countess of Pembroke or a member of a larger circle. He wanted to construct a world which, even as it entertained with its stories of love and war, would also extol virtue and condemn vice. In doing so, he remained in keeping with the tradition of the romance genre which, as Walter R. Davis states in *Idea and Act in Elizabethan Fiction*, “faces generic concerns – problems of good and evil” (48). Goran V. Stanivukovic goes so far as to characterize these romances as “conduct books for young men” especially regarding behavior in relationships with the opposite sex (60), although many viewed the works as “ladies’ texts” (Newcomb 38). Certainly Sidney addresses women readers.<sup>2</sup> The romance as “conduct book” is especially important because conduct books often stressed the importance of self-control and rationality in males (Shepherd 2003). Ironically, at the same time, many believed

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Hackett notes in *Women and Romance Fiction in the English Renaissance* that the perception of the romances as texts for ladies added to their appeal to male readers as well (11).

romances to be immoral, necessitating defenses such as Sidney's. In the tradition of Boccaccio, Sidney must attempt to justify morally his art: the creation of fictional literature (Levao 103). He does so with a humanist mentality that is also concerned with the promotion of Protestant and Calvinist ideals in literature (Hardison 78; Sinfield 130; Weiner 108). Sidney's friend and biographer Sir Fulke Greville affirms this in his *Life of Sir Philip Sidney*: "his end in [the dashes of his pen] was not vanishing pleasures alone, but morall Images, and Examples, (as directing threds) to guide every man through the confused *Labyrinth* of his own desires, and life" (223).<sup>3</sup>

As Edwin A. Greenlaw argues effectively, when Sidney revised the *Arcadia*, he took pains to take what had been largely pastoral and transform it into a heroic epic which would better instruct his readership as to the proper behaviors for virtuous men and women (274). While the *Old Arcadia* can also be termed a heroic work (Lawry 15), the heightened attention given to heroic acts in the *New Arcadia* makes the *New Arcadia* a much more fruitful source of exemplary virtue. The added tragedies such as the tale of Amphialus's fall give it a more somber tone despite the fact that comic elements remain. Although critics such as Paul Salzman caution against focusing too much on the comedy of the *Old Arcadia*, the tone changes to such a degree that Robert Kimbrough characterizes the transformation as one where Sidney "changed the mode from comic to heroic" (126). Its very incorporation of multiple genres establishes it as a romance.

The exemplary virtue that naturally comes to the fore in the genre of romance is constancy in love. Love drives the work, causing both its happiest and most tragic

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<sup>3</sup> While Greville could not perfectly know Sidney's intentionality, the fact that he knew Sidney so well lends credence to his opinions.

moments. The noble characters devote themselves to one love, and to that love they remain ever-true, despite hardship. Indeed, according to Pamela's theological oratory directed at Cecropia in *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, "perfect constancy" serves as a defining trait of God (488).<sup>4</sup> However, as the genre unfolds, we see again and again in male-authored romance an underlying ambivalence with the virtue of romantic constancy<sup>5</sup> in males. The trope of the man humiliating himself due to his all-consuming passion appears time after time; influenced by works such as *Orlando Innamorato*, which Jo Ann Cavallo calls "the point of departure for the Renaissance romance epic as we have come to know it" (7), male-authored romance presents degradation and folly as part and parcel of romantic constancy even as the author celebrates true love. This is in direct contrast to the female-authored romance views of constancy detailed in later chapters. In these works, as exemplified in Mary Wroth's *Urania* and Anna Weamys's *Continuation*, constancy is the all-important virtue which defines masculinity. Those who stray from it are those who must suffer degradation.

By contrast, Sidney's *Arcadia* falls into the pattern of ambivalence established by his predecessors. Like others before him, despite his determination to demonstrate the nobility of romantic constancy, Sidney betrays an underlying discomfort with constancy in males. Even in its purest form, the intense passion such devotion requires thrusts the heroes into the realm of the womanly as defined by Renaissance standards (Cady 154).

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<sup>4</sup> While I make reference to the differences in the *Old Arcadia* and *New Arcadia*, I use *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* as the main source for textual quotes.

<sup>5</sup> Here, I distinguish "romantic constancy" from the constancy to homosocial bonds as defined by Eve Sedgwick in *Between Men*. I also distinguish it from constancy in the theological realm. For the purposes of this paper, the ambiguity of constancy only extends to constancy in a love relationship. While Blair Worden notes that the friendships of *Arcadia* have their own passions, I choose to focus on the relationships that Sidney hoped to use as markers of virtuous romantic love.

As Anthony Fletcher states in *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800*, a man was expected to “enjoy the self-discipline that women lacked” (56). Male characters find themselves more often than not rendered ineffectual and even self-destructive by their inability to master their passions. When the object of one’s devotion does not reciprocate, constancy can become twisted; it can become a dangerous obsession; in the worst of circumstances, it can become a justification for causing pain. Sidney, like other romance writers before him, has to face an essential paradox. The heroes of his work should be paragons of masculinity in order to teach readers what to emulate. However, for the purposes of the plot, they had to fall so deeply in love that they become feminized in their inability to remain rational and in control. While the end goal of a proper and noble marriage alleviated the stigma of overwhelming desire, such passion remained, as Michael McCanles puts it in *Heroic Love*, “morally suspect” (34).

Critics have often noted Sidney’s emphasis on the debate between passion and reason and his attempt to resolve the two in his heroes<sup>6</sup>. I extend that debate to include the true complexities of the seemingly straightforward virtue of romantic constancy in the work. I argue that while Sidney recognizes constancy as a virtue for both women and men, his writing is influenced by the contemporary masculine unease with the level of need one must feel to engender such constancy. The characters’ lack of choice in the matter creates a situation where the man loses ownership of his own sexuality – there is

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<sup>6</sup> Ave Bergvall, *The “Enabling of Judgment”: Sir Philip Sidney and the Education of the Reader* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiskell International, 1989); William Craft, “Remaking the Heroic Self in the New Arcadia,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 25.1 (Winter, 1985): 45-67; F. Michael Krouse, “Plato and Sidney’s Defense of Poesy,” *Comparative Literature* 6.2: (Spring, 1954): 138-47; Mark Rose, “Sidney’s Womanish Man,” *The Review of English Studies* 15.60 (November 1964): 353-63.; Elliott M. Simon, “Sidney’s *Old Arcadia*: In Praise of Folly,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 17.3: 285-302 (1986); Robert E. Stillman, “The Politics of Sidney’s Pastoral,” *ELH* 52.4. (Winter, 1985): 795-814.

an unwilling willingness, so to speak. Even as the men delight in their love, they just as often curse the intensity of their need. This is doubly problematic because the ideal Renaissance man not only owns his own sexuality, but also controls female sexuality (Foyster 4). Loss of that control due to passion “was believed to make a man effeminate and incapable of manly action” (Fletcher, “Manhood” 427). The type of unwilling constancy presented in romances such as the *Arcadia* can become a destabilizing force in the gender paradigm, leading to masculine anxiety.

While the female lovers also struggle with the violence of their passions, they do not cast their complaints in the same terms as the male characters. The males often explicitly link their torturous passions to the inability to control themselves and their loss of masculine power. Protestations of unworthiness appear in both male and female love complaints, but the heroes vocalize more self-loathing than the heroines regarding their lack of control and weakness. One can see this exemplified in representative complaints of the love-lorn Prince Pyrocles and Gynecia, who desires the man that loves her daughter. Sidney’s choice to set the complaints apart as poetry does more than just call attention to the passages; the characters’ varying uses of poetry offer further insight into their minds. First, Pyrocles famously bemoans his fate when his best friend and cousin Musidorus comes across him after a long search:

Transform’d in show, but more transform’d in mind,

I cease to strive, with double conquest foil’d:

For, woe is me, my powers all I find

With outward force, and inward treason, spoil’d.

For from without came to mine eyes the blow,