

Strange Labyrinth: Finding Mary Wroth Anew

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In November 2020, Allison & Busby published my debut novel, *Imperfect Alchemist*, about Mary Sidney Herbert.¹ That was the second novel I had written. In 2014, I had published an article in this journal titled “Re-Imagining Mary Wroth Through Fiction” in which I shared my experience of moving from scholarship to fiction five years earlier by composing a novel about Mary Wroth, provisionally titled *Tale-Teller*. I mused that to write fiction after two decades of scholarship and classroom engagement with a topic is “to meet your subject entirely anew,” and described the process as “terrifying and exhilarating at once—overwhelming and utterly addictive.”² Revising that first novel now, I am discovering Mary Wroth anew.

Imperfect Alchemist is an imaginative reinvention of the life path of the Countess of Pembroke, one of the earliest women authors in Renaissance England to publish under her own name, who successfully forged a place for herself in a man’s world. This novel launches my projected series called *Shakespeare’s Sisters*, composed of six interrelated historical novels that imagine the stories of early modern women authors from their own perspectives.³ These novels offer fictional engagements with an array of early modern figures, from queens to commoners. Historical women, including Mary Sidney Herbert and Mary Wroth, are at the center of the narratives, bringing their voices and experiences to life for modern audiences.

All of the *Shakespeare’s Sisters* books will center on women whose lives and voices both shape and are shaped by

¹ Naomi Miller, *Imperfect Alchemist* (London: Allison & Busby, 2020).

² Naomi J. Miller, “Re-Imagining Mary Wroth Through Fiction,” *Sidney Journal* 32.2 (2014), 39.

³ For more information about the series, see <https://naomimillerbooks.com>.

women, many of whom appear in each other's stories.⁴ Spanning generations and social classes, the series paints a multi-hued portrait of Renaissance England, seen through the lives of courtiers, commoners, poets, playwrights and, above all, indomitable women who broke the rules of their time while juggling many of the responsibilities and obstacles faced by women worldwide today.

In my *Shakespeare's Sisters* series I'm interested not in using imagined female characters to reframe Shakespeare or in reimagining historical women as Shakespeare's Dark Lady, but in highlighting the voices of actual early modern women authors, writers unknown to Virginia Woolf when she conjured her phantasm of Shakespeare's sister Judith as a failed author, in order to hypothesize about the absence of early modern women authors from the canon. In the twenty-first century, feminist critics and scholars have successfully reshaped the canon to recognize a multitude of early women authors, from "Jane Anger" to Mary Sidney Herbert, Rachel Speght to Mary Wroth.

Writing my novel about Mary Sidney Herbert was a voyage of discovery back to my previously drafted and not-yet-published novel about Mary Sidney Wroth, which I'm currently in the process of revising. Now titled *Secret Story-Maker*, it serves as a sequel to *Imperfect Alchemist*, focusing on Mary Wroth and including other characters who have already appeared in that preceding novel. Having brought one novel from multiple drafts through revision to publication, I'm discovering what matters to me as a novelist as I turn my attention to this next novel.

As the acclaimed historical novelist Sarah Dunant observes, fashioning historical verisimilitude, "like a pointillist painting," lies in the details. Indeed, Dunant describes historical details as "gold dust," giving her readers confidence that they're encountering worlds that actually existed, thus grounding the novel's inventions in a "multicolored" world.⁵ One revelation that I've experienced in moving between scholarship and fiction is that there are many possible strategies for engaging "truthfully" with historical details. As a Wroth scholar and teacher, I was too knowledgeable about my subject when I first launched into the novel

⁴ In my own path as both a scholar and a novelist, I've worked to transform what I have termed the "Noah's Ark approach" to the study as well as fictionalization of women authors—linking an otherwise "minor" woman with a recognized patriarch in order to legitimate the female half of the pair (see Naomi J. Miller, "Imagining Shakespeare's Sisters: Fictionalizing Mary Sidney Herbert and Mary Sidney Wroth," in *Authorizing Early Modern European Women: From Biography to Biofiction*, ed. James Fitzmaurice, Naomi J. Miller, and Sara Jayne Steen [Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021], 129-40).

⁵ Meredith Ray, "A Conversation with Sarah Dunant," *ITALICA*, 90:4 (2013), 670.

about Wroth to transition easily into fiction, too “expert” and too constrained by the invisible but inexorable rules of scholarship: don’t make assumptions and never make an assertion you can’t back up with evidence. But as a novelist, I have come to realize that is precisely my job—to enter freely into the world of imaginative possibility, to listen to my characters, to employ evidence lightly as gold dust rather than heavily as blocks of marble.

I am not building a temple to my subject, but seeding a garden with new life—watering, weeding, and welcoming whatever might arise—while maintaining the responsibility to my story to determine whether or not a certain known fact belongs there and to what use it might be put. And so I have slowly learned to adapt the scholarly techniques that have served me throughout my career for this new purpose, not to draw connections between text and context, but to create a world in which my fictionalized protagonists can live and breathe, labor and love.⁶ To create the form and texture of the time, I examine historical studies documenting early modern clothes and food, source texts containing descriptions of cultural practices and attitudes, and collections of letters and diary entries by other early modern women. Most important, I return to the primary texts that started me on this journey in the first place: the words and works of Mary Wroth, just as I turned to the actual Mary Sidney Herbert to fashion my imperfect alchemist.

⁶ I’m more grateful than I can possibly express to the brilliant scholars and illuminating critics whose work on the Sidney family authors has enabled my acts of reimagination. To name just a few—Margaret Hannay, whose three-dimensional literary biographies of Mary Sidney Herbert and Mary Wroth have provided both the inspiration and the foundation for my novels about them; Ilona Bell and Josephine Roberts, Alison Findlay and Marion Wynne-Davies, and Mary Ellen Lamb, all of whose critical editions and articles about the poems, play, and prose romance of Mary Wroth have enabled my deeper understanding of how to recognize and appreciate Wroth’s vision through her words. See Margaret Hannay, *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) and *Philip’s Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Ilona Bell, ed., *Mary Wroth, Pamphilia to Amphilanthus in Manuscript and Print* (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series, 59; Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017) and Josephine A. Roberts, ed., *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth* (Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1992); Alison Findlay, Philip Sidney and Michael G. Brennan, eds., *Love’s Victory: by Lady Mary Wroth, The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), and S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies, eds., *Mary Wroth, Love’s Victory (1621)*, in *Renaissance Drama By Women: Texts and Documents* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Mary Ellen Lamb, ed., *Mary Wroth, The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania (Abridged)* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), as well as her forthcoming edition of William Herbert’s poems (Toronto: Iter), alongside her multiple articles about works by Mary Wroth, William Herbert, and other members of the Sidney family.

The celebrated novelist Hilary Mantel maintains that “you become a novelist so you can tell the truth,” and observes that “most historical fiction is ... in dialogue with the past.”⁷ My driving aim is to “tell the truth” that becomes visible in these historical women’s writings, and to put my own fiction into dialogue with theirs. With that aim in mind, I’m learning to practice a combination of rigor and patience toward that earlier version of myself as a novelist, “imperfect” to say the least. The transmutation of *Tale-Teller* into *Secret Story-Maker* is proving to be a journey marked by as much mishap and discovery as any of the alchemical transmutations that punctuate *Imperfect Alchemist*. To draw on Wroth’s own metaphor from her sonnet sequence, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, my previous draft currently functions as a “strange labyrinth” through which I must find my way anew to rendering the truths of Wroth’s inventions.

Whenever in doubt about what my characters might say to one another, I listen to Wroth’s voices. I pay attention when a female character in Wroth’s prose romance advises her friend to stop lamenting her male lover’s inconstancy and instead pursue her own path: “Follow that, and be the Empress of the World, commanding the Empire of your own mind.”⁸ Powerful words—indeed, subject-changing. Hardly typical of what women authors, let alone male authors, were writing in the early 1600s.⁹ Those bold words, currently available only in an out-of-print modern edition of *The Second Part of the Countess of Montgomery’s Urania*, now appear in a conversation between two female characters in *Secret Story-Maker*.

My aim with each novel in the *Shakespeare’s Sisters* series is to tell a story that envisions the perspectives of historical women

⁷ Hilary Mantel, “The Day is for the Living,” *BBC Reith Lecture One*, 13 June 2007, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/bo8tcbrp>; accessed 6 July 2020.

⁸ Mary Wroth, *The Second Part of the Countess of Montgomery’s Urania*, ed. Josephine A. Roberts, completed by Suzanne Gossett and Janel Mueller (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 112. While to have these words accessible in any modern edition at all can be regarded as a triumph of scholarly reclamation, given that the sole previous edition was published in 1621 and immediately censored by the court of King James, they remain largely unavailable to a non-scholarly audience for Wroth’s prose romance. Fortunately, an abbreviated modern version of both parts of *Urania* is available in Mary Ellen Lamb’s paperback edition, *Mary Wroth: The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania (Abridged)* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011).

⁹ For an extended consideration of Mary Wroth’s works in relation not simply to canonical male authors but to other early modern women authors from Mary Sidney Herbert to Aemilia Lanyer, whose works inspired and shaped Wroth’s own, see my *Changing the Subject: Mary Wroth and Figurations of Gender in Early Modern England* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1996).

in a world that encompasses both known facts and imagined possibilities, illumining the historical record without being limited by it, and to honor and channel, to the best of my ability, the voices of women authors themselves.¹⁰

I invite you to enter the labyrinth of *Secret Story-Maker* through its Prologue.

* * *

The court of King James I is no place for a woman with a mind of her own.

The voices of her characters, who speak with greater confidence than their author, have brought her, first, satisfaction, then pleasure. And now, trouble.

The carriage jolts over another rut in the London streets, throwing Mary against the side wall. Her teeth grit together, fists clenching against her palms. She fears this journey will end in disaster.

Ben Jonson warned her about this. But too late now. The King's men will exact their revenge.

All such men can see is themselves, every surface a mirror. Do they not understand that their fury exposes their guilt? Reading her book, they were drawn to the lustrous surfaces of the stories, like moon-washed waves capturing their attention, and missed the richer currents underneath. If they had listened more closely to the voices inside her stories, they might have found people more interesting than themselves. Futile to explain that what they miss is more important than what they think they see. Some villains amongst them, indeed, but most merely fools.

Outraged at seeing their own reflections in her made-up tales, the King's favorites may demand—what? Judging by the one courtier who already has assayed a direct attack, she can imagine: her book banned, herself shamed, or worse. Escaping that fate will be difficult, if not impossible.

Unless—until—her most powerful ally in the court steps forward. Closer to the King than any of her naysayers, her cousin William Herbert can offer a lifeline. Now more than ever.

The carriage jolts again, turning off the London road as the forbidding towers of Hampton Court come into view. Through the window Mary looks across the formal gardens, once so vibrant, now

¹⁰ In the following excerpts from *Secret Story-Maker*, quotations from the actual writings of early modern authors, Mary Wroth, Amelia Lanier, Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson, are rendered in italics.

bleached by winter's chill. Raising her pomander to her nose, she inhales deeply, breathing in mingled aromas of rosemary and mint that recall her mother's presence, so desperately needed and dearly missed.

The carriage passes through the gates, clatters across the Base Court and shudders to a halt before the arched stone entrance. As a footman unfastens the door, river fog filters into the carriage. Mary draws back in the seat and swallows, hard, against the lump in her throat. Only a fool would feel no fear.

In this strange labyrinth, how shall I turn? Words from one of her sonnets echo in her head. She draws a breath. Then, stepping down onto the paving stones, Mary straightens her spine and enters the palace.

A solitary figure, but not alone. Even the King's men cannot silence her voices.

* * *

Next, I share a look down one of the many byways in the maze of Mary's life, as she negotiates some of the challenges that threaten to overwhelm her, writing herself forward. This excerpt from Chapter Ten reimagines a scene from *Imperfect Alchemist* in a different form and from a different point of view.

* * *

The words had spread over the thick parchment beneath her quill, blotted with the speed and pressure of her hand. Although the sonnet was still only a preliminary flow of lines, dark depths surged beneath the words: the loss of hope that had filled her entire body at the first cramping flow of blood after the masque, the sense that her body was not subject to her will, and with that, the uncomfortable awareness that not only her body but her heart had betrayed her, coming alive again to a false hope, an impossible desire, for the husband she could never claim as hers.

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show ... I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe. Not her own words, but lines in her uncle Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence, giving voice to the hopeless love of Astrophil for the unattainable Stella, married to another. To Mary, the cycle of poems, like the two star-evoking names, had always seemed to shine like constellations in the night sky, composing pictures defined by pinpricks of unquenchable light. Mary was thinking of that verse now, not just for its lovelorn sorrow and the poet's *truant pen* that stops the flow

of words, but for the concluding image of a difficult pregnancy and labor—*Thus great with child to speak and helpless in my throes*—until finally his Muse chastises him: *Fool! ... look in thy heart, and write*. Unlike her uncle, Mary chose to draw on her own bodily experience as a woman in employing that metaphor to convey not success, but failure.

Her own sonnet, expelled onto the page in the dark night of her miscarriage, had come in a rush of ink and tears. And it was that verse she decided to share when, that spring, her godmother invited Mary to attend one of her regular gatherings of authors, known simply as the Circle. The Countess had inaugurated the meetings two decades earlier to honor the memory of her brother Philip, killed in action in the Netherlands, calling its members together intermittently at either Baynards Castle or Wilton House. The invitation was equal parts exciting and daunting. Exciting to be sharing her work with such a glittering fraternity of prominent poets, all of them men, whose works Mary knew but many of whom she hadn't met—and daunting for that very reason. Knowing that Ben Jonson was part of the Circle was a source of comfort—a reliable friend and newfound colleague. But learning that William would also be there both thrilled and worried her.

"I have invited several other women," the Countess had promised her niece. "You need not worry that you'll be the only one." They included her own daughter Anne and Elizabeth Cary, two promising young poets, both of them around Mary's age and also recently married, and an older woman, Aemilia Lanyer. She had met Aemilia once, when visiting her friend Anne Clifford. She served as Anne's tutor and was, by her friend's account, an author who had no doubt that her words deserved an audience.

Indeed, Mary craved the audience of the other women authors who would share the Circle with her. Still fearful of speaking up in a group of strangers, she tried to draw comfort from the fact that all she need do was read aloud her own written words, composed in private and, she hoped, ready for other ears. How ready, she wasn't certain.

She questioned her decision to read her miscarriage poem to this gathering. All the prominent male writers would know her uncle's sonnet, of course, and might bristle at her darkening of the metaphor. They might well be offended by its subject, exposing the frailties of her body—not to mention her heart—to possibly indifferent, incredulous or even hostile listeners. What could men know of pregnancy? But her aunt had asked her to bring a poem to read, adding, "Your best work, something that stretches you and challenges the hearer." So, Mary resolved, better tread than tiptoe.

As soon as she entered the luxurious Great Hall on the ground floor of Baynards Castle, Mary was seized by a fierce conviction that accepting her aunt's invitation had been a terrible mistake. But before she could turn on her heel and venture an excuse to the Countess, she felt her hand squeezed and looked up. Aemilia Lanyer.

"So we're both to read tonight. Nothing like entering the lion's den to generate courage, eh, Mary?" Surprised by the woman's welcoming smile and gentle but firm grip, she found herself laughing and willingly led toward the circle of chairs set up at one end of the room. Among the male guests she recognized only Ben Jonson, John Donne—whose satirical and sensual verses were eagerly shared in intellectual circles—and William, who scattered her fleeting moment of confidence when he took a seat at her side, giving her a noncommittal nod. Her cheeks flamed and the sheet containing her sonnet shook in her hand. But her aunt was speaking. "I am pleased tonight to introduce four new members to our Circle," the Countess began. "Some of them you know by name and family connection. All of them you will come to know and appreciate through the work they will share. And from you I hope they might gain wisdom and skill."

When Aemilia rose to read aloud from her work-in-progress, Mary's attention was riveted by this fearless woman whose whole demeanor conveyed confidence and conviction. "My work is dedicated to all virtuous ladies and gentlewomen," she declared, her piercing black eyes sweeping the circle. "And not," she continued, looking down at her paper, "*evil-disposed men, who forgetting they were born of women, nourished of women, do like vipers deface the wombs wherein they were bred.*"

Mary's response was tinder set alight by a flame. What bold words! She marveled at this confident voice, careless of censure or ridicule. Her own sonnet of bloody loss and heartache could hardly compete. Indeed, she felt a small stab of relief that its topic was not likely to prove more controversial than Aemilia's. A shocked silence was followed by several audible gasps. But Ben Jonson nodded appreciatively, and the other young women positively glowed.

Then her turn arrived. Mary stood, her shoulders straight and head erect, striving to hide her nervousness. The sheet of paper in her hand was trembling again, but she forced her mouth to move.

*False hope, which feeds but to destroy and spill
What it first breeds; unnatural to the birth
Of thine own womb, conceiving but to kill.*

After Aemilia, her voice sounded insubstantial in her ears. But the sonnet carried her forward on its own conviction. When she finished, there was another pause. Mary held her breath. Then the other women writers applauded wildly—Aemilia even called out “Brava!”—and the Countess nodded decisively, while John Donne maintained a thoughtful expression. When Ben smiled warmly, Mary was uncomfortably aware that he might have comprehended more than she had intended for this audience. But that was only to be expected. As he had once told her, “Never be afraid to have your voice heard by others—as long as you write first for yourself.”

* * *

The Mary Wroth that readers will meet in my novel is, together with the other women authors who inhabit the *Shakespeare's Sisters* series, at once historical and fictional, inventive and invented. I like to think that Mary Wroth, who peopled the hundreds of pages of her prose romance with an ingenious panoply of distinctive characters, would appreciate my imagined account of her own story in *Secret Story-Maker*.