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"poetticall raptures, and fixions": Mary Wroth's Negotiation of Early Modern Poetics and Ovid in the *Urania*

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In the manuscript continuation of Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, the character Antissia goes mad writing inappropriate poetry because an overly ambitious scholar of Ovid supposedly leads her to dabble with literature that is beyond women's mental capacity. This instance of explicit critique of a female author in the first English romance authored by a woman has continued to trouble critics. My analysis of the episode proposes an alternative approach to the scathing critique on Antissia's writing by instead reading it as an intervention in the contemporary discourse of poetics. Rather than criticising female authorship, I argue, Wroth questions the proper place of writing in relation to social duties, reflects on poetic invention and craftsmanship and on how to engage with canonical precursors and models. By exposing the authorship practices of Antissia and her tutor and their uncritical emulation of canonical male texts, Wroth valorises her own reworking of two tales from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and indirectly outlines an ideal female or male writer in the tradition of Aristotle and Philip Sidney.

Keywords: authorship practices, female authorship, early modern poetics, Ovid, Wroth

The cartouche on the frontispiece of Lady Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621) explicitly states that Wroth is the daughter of Robert Sidney, Earl of Leicester, and niece of Sir Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke. This is commonly interpreted as a strategic move to enhance Wroth's authority and prestige as a writer (cf. for instance Krontiris 122; Hannay 1; Quilligan 191).[1] By affiliating

[1] For an image of the frontispiece, see the digitised Folger copy accessible on Luna: luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/detail/FOLGERCM1~6~6~28474~168643:The-Countesse-of-Mountgomeries-Uran.

themselves with literary predecessors, authors extend and shape the afterlives of those writers while simultaneously fashioning their own authorial reputations—an ambition Wroth spells out bluntly in the portrait of a tutor and would-be-poet, "studying how to make a peece of poetrie to excel Ovid, and to bee more admired then hee is" (*U2* 40).[2] The attempt to write oneself into a literary lineage can be made more or less openly; it can be achieved by explicitly invoking one's chosen models, by imitating their style, genre and/or subject matter, or else by way of literary allusion. Yet, regardless of the chosen method, the act of inscribing oneself into a literary tradition also constitutes a negotiation and reinterpretation of that tradition: that is to say, an engagement with the questions of what place literature should occupy, what its purpose should be, and what forms it should take.

For early modern women writers the need to legitimise their status as authors was more urgent and difficult due to the comparative lack of an authoritative female literary canon. Moreover, as Elizabeth Scott-Baumann emphasises, this lack also extends to early modern women critics, whose discussions of literature remained mostly unremarked upon because they tended to occur in less public genres (143, 145–146, 156). This context, I would venture, underlies Wroth's scathing representation of Antissia's mad authorship in the manuscript continuation of the *Urania* that has troubled Wroth scholars. Why would Wroth include such a negative version of female authorship, which, as Jocelyn Catty, among others, has noted (cf. 207–208),[3] resonates with Edward Denny's attacks on Wroth herself, when elsewhere she is so intent on legitimising herself as a writer and as the inheritor of the Sidney literary legacy? I contend that what Wroth is offering us is a sustained though somewhat conservative reflection on literary writing or literary ambitions in the context of the (courtly) society she moves in, including the question of how to engage with the legacy of classical authors, be it as a female or male writer. The episode of Antissia's mad authorship questions the place literary production should occupy in a noblewoman's or -man's daily life and what the appropriate attitude to one's own writing should be. Moreover, aligning

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2 All quotations from the *Urania* are from *The First Part of "The Countess of Montgomery's Urania,"* edited by Josephine A. Roberts and from *The Second Part*, edited by Roberts, Suzanne Gossett and Janel M. Muller. The two parts will be distinguished by the abbreviations *U1* and *U2* in parenthetical references.

3 Cf. also Mary Ellen Lamb (*Gender and Authorship* 159–163) and Paul Salzman (*English Prose Fiction* 143–144).

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herself with her uncle's *Defence of Poesie*, Wroth critically engages with the Ionian figure of the poet inspired by the Gods, antithetically outlining an ideal writer who, as a properly taught craftsman, respects generic boundaries, eschews verbose euphuisms and skilfully appropriates the texts of literary precursors like Ovid. By exposing Antissia's authorship practices, Wroth thus indirectly valorises her own writing and radical appropriation of Ovidian texts, suggesting that the bid for an authorial afterlife requires more than the mere invocation and naïve imitation of canonical writers.

Scholars have offered various interpretations of the Antissia episode. Mary Ellen Lamb's discussion in *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* is especially attentive to textual details and ends with a series of suggestions for possible interpretations:

> Is Antissia an alter ego or a debased self-image? Does Antissia function as a kind of lightning rod to ground otherwise destructive cultural prohibitions against women's writing? Or does her mad form of authorship … reflect the increasing anxieties of the author of *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* prompted by the outcry greeting Wroth's published folio? (162)

I agree with Barbara Lewalski and other critics that Wroth does use Antissia as a "foil" (294) and aims to distinguish her writing and herself as an author from Antissia's "frivelous discourse and strange actions" (*U2* 35). At the same time, we cannot discount the possibility that the depiction of the mad Antissia references a contemporary of Wroth's, setting that person up for ridicule by exaggerating certain characteristics or a specific incident known to the Sidney-Herbert circle, which might partly explain the intimate feel of the episode and the cruelty of the jibes. However cruel the "character assassination of Antissia" (*Gender and Authorship* 160), as Lamb calls it, there are two aspects of the episode that I think have not sufficiently been considered in critical analysis to date. Firstly, although Antissia's literary production is ridiculed and severely criticised, her attempt to write is not what Antissia is censured for. Secondly, the focus on the meaning and significance of Antissia as an anti-model female author has impeded critical reflection on the theoretical literary discourse the episode invokes and the role of Antissia's tutor, i.e., the circumstance that she is not alone in her preposterous practice of authorship.

The episode of Antissia's mad authorship relates how Antissia, after employing a tutor, starts writing and declaiming unruly literary texts. She neglects all social decorum and duties, rendering the life of her husband,

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Dolorindus, miserable and putting off family members and friends by her behaviour. To cure Antissia, Dolorindus tricks her into a magic water cure dispensed by the sage Melissea. The cure is successful in making Antissia ashamed of her behaviour, but it does not lead her to a better understanding of her literary failures. The episode unfolds in several instalments, consisting of three moments of communal exchange among protagonists with an intermediate part that is represented directly in the narrative. This means that from the outset, Antissia's madness and literary aspirations are subject to debate as her behaviour is reported, discussed and reflected on. Moreover, in the first half of the episode, near the beginning of the manuscript continuation, the other protagonists' reactions to Antissia's behaviour are also commented on. While especially the male characters, Antissius and Rosindy, censure Antissia for her shortcomings, Pamphilia shows a more nuanced reaction, questioning the male characters' harsh condemnation, pitying Antissia's state and trying to understand what led to it. For the second half of the episode, which occurs in the second book of the manuscript continuation, the responsibility of reflecting on Antissia's case is shifted to the text's readers or listeners. The episode's narrative structure per se thus problematises a straightforward interpretation of Antissia's authorship practices and instead emplots them as a matter for critical discussion. As so often in the *Urania*, Wroth does not present us with an authoritative treatise but rather raises issues for reflection and debate, while nudging her readership or audience towards one standpoint or another. Rebecca Fall concludes from the episode's set up that Antissia's unruly literary endeavours are narratively and socially productive, in that they provoke narrative progression and allow characters to bond over their criticism of Antissia's excesses and over their negotiation of what is sensible or acceptable (267, 272). While Antissia's troubles certainly pose the question of what is acceptable, I think that Wroth is not exploring the delimitations of sense and nonsense from an absolute perspective, but rather in relation to literary authorship practices that concern both female and male authors.

In what follows, I focus on the criticism levelled at Antissia in connection with her writing, moving from the more general to the more specifically literary points of critique. Antissia's first failing is that she puts her poetic pursuits above her duties of hospitality when welcoming Rosindy. As the ever practically minded Urania comments:

> Butt what food did she give you ore comfort after your neere suffering shipwrack? If noe other then this [verbose greeting], itt wowld have binn

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> to mee a greater storme then the first; this soe cruell, empty blasts of senceles discourse cowld hardly fill the vaines of disaster. (*U2* 35)

Antissia utterly fails to give appropriate attention to Rosindy's physical needs, with the consequence that her elaborate greeting, as Urania insists, is not only tedious but more harmful than the storm that blew Rosindy to her shores. It falls to Antissia's husband, Dolorindus, to "refres[h]" the "wants" of the "wett, hunger-sterv'd almost, sea-and-wether-beaten" Rosindy and to "entertai[n]" him "with […] pleasing discourse" (*U2* 35). It is thus not Antissia's wish to write and publish her writing as such that incurs criticism, but her failure to limit her literary aspirations and poetic performance to the proper time and place. Literary endeavours, Wroth seems to suggest, should not be a noblewoman's or -man's first concern and take precedence over their social duties—a position that recalls Ben Jonson's praise of Wroth's mother for her model management of the estate in "To Penshurst" (Woudhuysen 422, ll.57–90). Unlike Antissia's poetic endeavours, Barbara Sidney's "high huswifery" (l.85) ensures that a king whose visit is unexpected will still find a due welcome—even in her absence.[4]

Antissia's second major shortcoming is her attitude towards her own literary output, that is, her pride and uncritical belief in its quality and her self-promotion as a writer. Rosindy criticises this failing as follows:

> The night beefor I went thence she caused her houshould ladys and servants to present a show to mee, which she to illustrate her owne glory did soe commend and overvallue, telling (to conclude) all (to bee vaine) that itt was of her owne compiling, as she called itt, as verily itt made mee nott esteeme itt att all, though I must confess som things were tollerable, yet nott answerable to her commendations. (*U2* 35)

Antissia's scheme to put on a masque for Rosindy is not criticised, implying that in this instance, literary entertainment occurs in its proper place. Nor is it a problem that Antissia authored the "show" and had it staged by

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4 Compare also the cryptic explanation accompanying one of the few depictions in the manuscript continuation of Pamphilia writing poetry to capture her grief: "a thing she had nott in a pretty space dunn ore could give libertie soe long to her sorrow and cross destinie as to doe" (*U2* 279). Pamphilia clearly does not indulge in poetic expression of her emotions although, according to the narrative, she would prefer this to "all the stately cerimonies" (279), implying that it might be social and political obligations that prevent her from "giv[ing] libertie soe long to her sorrow." Cf. also Salzman's discussion of this passage ('The Politics of Complaint' 150).

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a cast including women. Even the quality of the entertainment is partly acceptable, as Rosindy grudgingly admits. What is deemed problematic, however, is Antissia's boasting, her overvaluing of her own work, her lack of modesty and her affectation, visible in the word "compiling." To readers familiar with the first part of Wroth's romance, these overbearing aspects of Antissia's character come as no surprise, and it is no coincidence that Antissia is twice compared to the Ovidian figure Niobe (*U1* 147; *U2* 35). Indeed, it is highly ironic because Antissia herself makes the connection, comparing (*U1* 147) and contrasting (*U2* 35) her tears to those of Niobe, without recognising that she is prone to sharing the character's traditional flaws, i.e., overweening pride and a tendency to overstep without considering the possible effects of her acts. Arthur Golding in his 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* writes of Niobe that despite

> Arachnes punishment at home before hir eyes,
> To vse discreter kinde of talke it could hir not aduise,
> Nor (as behoueth) to the Gods to yéelde in humble wise.
> For many things did make hir proud. (70)

The description of Niobe neatly encapsulates Antissia's resistance to counsel, her sense of self-importance, and the lack of discretion and emotional control that figures her as a counter version of the romance's protagonist and Wroth-avatar Pamphilia.

The criticism of Antissia's self-promotion as a writer brings us back to the question of how to interpret the celebratory cartouche announcing Wroth's authorship in the published *Urania*'s frontispiece. Provided Wroth had some say in the design of the cartouche,[5] one could read the central position and capitalisation of her name as an act of self-promotion similar to Antissia's insistence on "her own compiling" of her work. However, the work's title "The Countesse of Mountgomeries URANIA" by far trumps Wroth's name in terms of size and legibility, as if to imply that the work, vouched for by its dedicatee, should speak for itself and any promotion of and by the author comes secondary. Furthermore, one could argue that the enumeration of the Sidney lineage, visually supporting Wroth's name, counterbalances its centrality, deflecting attention from Wroth herself and functioning as a gesture of deference that goes precisely against Antissia's boasting of her sole authorship and instead acknowledges Wroth's debt to her literary mentors. Presenting herself as the offspring of a family renowned for their literary accomplishments sug-

5 I have discussed this issue elsewhere (Orgis 13–24).

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gests an inheritance of talent and a literary education akin to an apprenticeship. The mention of the "ever famous, and renowned" (*U1* cxxi) Philip Sidney, in particular, positions Wroth's work in a tradition of literary craftsmanship that differs from the view of authorship embodied by Antissia.

Antissia's authorship and behaviour have traditionally been examined in the context of contemporary ideas of madness and melancholy (cf. Catty 199–208; Hackett 68). I propose that the representation of Antissia's authorship and its discussion by the other characters also reflects the importance of contemporary debates over the nature of poetry/literature, based on the writings of Plato, Aristotle and Horace. One fundamental question in this debate is whether poetry should be regarded as an art governed by rules and hence demanding study and technical mastery, following early modern readings of Aristotle's *Poetics* (Halliwell 291–312), or as the result of divine inspiration, also referred to as *furor poeticus*, as suggested in Plato's *Ion*, where poets are described as "not in their senses" but "seized with Bacchic transport and […] possessed" (220).[6] Antissia's authorship is repeatedly discussed in terms of "that phantisy they call poeticall furies" (*U2* 33), which is the phrase Rosindy uses when he starts relating his encounter with Antissia. Antissia's nephew, Antissius, speaks of her "phantisies" (34) and her "heigth of poetry, which att the best is butt a frency" (41). Urania assumes that Antissia is "grievously distracted" (35), Dolorindus criticises Antissia's "poeticall furies" (51), and the narrating voice describes her as suffering from "distractions" (50) and being in a state of "fury" (52). In the debate on the nature of poetry, Antissia thus comes down on the side of *Ion*. Wroth, on the other hand, seems in line with Philip Sidney, who, in his *Defence of Poesie*, insists on the poet as a "Maker" and distances himself from Plato's notion of "Poesie" as "a very inspiring of a divine force, farre above mans wit" (87, 117). In other words, Wroth sides with the Aristotelian idea of poetry as craftsmanship or possibly adheres to the Horatian compromise that inspiration and craft need to work hand in hand (Horace 484–485). In his 1599 *Model of Poesy* William Scott (c. 1571-c. 1617) formulates this com-

[6] For the early modern reception of the "doctrine of the *furor poeticus*," see Gavin Alexander's commentary on William Scott's *Model of Poesy*, where he explains that "the main line of Neoplatonic thought about poetic inspiration derives from the *Ion*" although "Plato describes the madness by which the poet is possessed by the Muses in *Phaedrus*" (97 n.7.16–18). For a discussion of Aristotle's conception of poetry in reaction to Plato in its classical context, see Stephen Halliwell (9–10, 23–24, 26).

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promise in a comment that reads like a blueprint of Antissia's failings: "Yet I trust no artist is so overweeningly conceited that he will neglect those artificial directions which bring this natural propenseness and supernatural inspiring into actual and habitual perfection" (10).[7] Poetry, according to Scott, springs from talent and inspiration but needs to be artfully regulated to meet contemporary stylistic expectations. Antissia fails at this artistic regulation and incurs criticism for doing so.

Antissia's ignorance or neglect of proper Aristotelian craftsmanship and poetic categories immediately puts off Rosindy when he encounters her on the beach:

> she was upon the sand, neither waulking, running, norr standing still, yett partly exercising all. She neither sange, nor spake, nor cried, nor laughed, butt a strange mixture of all thes together, soe discomposed as if pieces of all throwne into a hatt and shouke together to bee drawne out, like Valantines to bee worne by several persones, noe one to have them all, yett all thes peeces hunge about her att that time. (*U2* 33)

Rosindy, who is admired by the other characters for his report because it is "soe neatly discoursed and certainly well sett out" (36), continues his criticism of Antissia's performance by pointing out that he could not tell if she was speaking in "prose ore verse" (34). Antissia's production sounds both experimental and creative, but in the context of the *Urania* it is clearly considered monstrous and lacking artistic control. It is literally "discomposed," i.e., the antithesis of a successful composition, and Antissia's monstrous mixing of genres—reminiscent of Sidney's "mongrell Tragy-comedie" (122)—is mirrored in her inappropriate mixture of clothing and gestures, which expose her to ridicule and suggest a concomitant lack of control over her body and by extension her sexuality, recalling the virulent public 'Hic—Haec' debate over cross-dressing in the 1620s.[8]

Antissia's choice of style and her poetic aspirations also incur strictures. Antissia favours a verbose euphuistic style that the other characters qualify as "senceles," "fustian taulke," "strained pratling" (*U2* 35), "extravagant" (41) and "forced language" (36). In contrast to Scott's "actuall

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7 Scott's treatise survives in a manuscript copy, presumably "Sir Henry Lee's presentation copy" (lxxvi), to whom the treatise was dedicated. There is to my knowledge no concrete indication that Wroth knew Scott's work, but the possibility exists given Scott's distant family relation to the Sidneys and his ties to Sir Thomas Smythe, whose widow married Wroth's father in 1626 (Scott li). Moreover, Scott's work frequently refers to and extols Sidney's *Defence*.

8 On the 'Hic—Haec' debate, see for instance Mary Beth Rose (367–378).

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[…] perfection" that artists should aspire to, Rosindy insists on the outdatedness of Antissia's style by referring to it as "som poetrie, though olde, sickly stuff, as if poetry were fallen into a consumption" (34). Moreover, Antissia's literary production is not only overly ostentatious but also flattering in intention: Antissia blatantly tries to gain the admiration of Rosindy and later the sage Melissea by hyperbolically praising them to their faces. Melissea's response to Antissia that her "high expressions […] are nott usually found in Ladys, especially of [her] fashion" (52) points to Wroth's parodic performance through the character Antissia and suggests a general critique of overly obsequious, patronage-seeking writers that extends beyond noblewomen to include male writers, implying that they are the more usual practitioners of such writing, especially if lower class.

Thanks to Pamphilia's enquiries, we learn that Antissia's poetic (as opposed to social) failures are to some extent the consequence of inept instruction by the "mad" (41) tutor whom she employed after hearing of him (41) and who, according to Antissius, "soe fittly hath […] served her as to make her as mad as him self" (41). The nameless tutor does not receive much textual space in the romance, and even less in criticism. Antissia meets him "by mere chance" when he is "waulking on thos sands" (40), i.e., in the liminal space of the beach, and he utterly disappears from the text after the voyage to Delos where Antissia is cured. Nevertheless, as the first of only two tutors in the *Urania*,[9] his presence in the romance is exceptional and, I would argue, qualifies some of the criticism directed at Antissia. The tutor is described as "raving out high-strained lines which had broke the bounds of his braines, and yett raged in the same fitt still" (40–41), thus setting the model for Antissia's performances. His poetic hubris is signalled by Antissius's parenthetical remark that the tutor "had binn mad in studying how to make a peece of poetrie to excel Ovid, and to bee more admired then hee is" (40). The derogatory description of Antissia's tutor shows that although the criticism of Antissia figures more prominently in the episode, the poetic practices she is criticised for are equally reprehensible in a male writer. It follows that perhaps Antissia's most grievous fault is her lack of judgement in her choice of tutor and in her qualitative assessment of his poetic performance.

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9 The second tutor is the meddling Forsandurus (presumably a reference to Hugh Sanford, tutor of William Herbert), who is responsible for the break-up between the protagonists Amphilanthus and Pamphilia in the manuscript continuation of the romance (cf. *U2* 502 n.131.39, 544 n.385.33).

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In addition to imitating the tutor's style of performance and diction, Antissia likewise seems to embrace his flawed ambition to surpass Ovid. This finds expression, I would propose, in the following poem celebrating Venus and her "pleasures still unseene" (50):

> Come lusty gamesters of the sea:
> Billowes waves, and winds,
> Like to most lovers make your plea
> Say love all combinds;
> Lett nott Dian rule your sprites,
> Her pale face shuns all delights.
>
> Venus was borne of the sea foame;
> Queene of love is she,
> Like her, sweet, pleasant phantisies roame,
> This varietie.
> Juno yett a firme wife is,
> Soe may I bee in my blis.
>
> Pallas is yett a fierce, sterne lass,
> Wisdome doth profess.
> Ceares a hous-wife I soone pass;
> Lovers I express.
> Venus, my deere sea-borne Queene,
> Gives mee pleasures still unseene.
>
> And you, faire starry sky, beeholde
> Venus mee commaunds,
> That by noe means love showld grow colde
> Butt blowe the fire brands.
> Solls best heat must fill our vaines;
> Thes are true loves highest straines. (50–51)

With this poem Antissia intends "to shew you [that is, her husband Dolorindus] my love in verce as well as prose" (51), but her profession of "true loves highest straines" recalls the "high-strained lines" of her tutor and has the contrary effect of scandalising Dolorindus. Out of her list of goddesses, Antissia chooses Venus as her inspiration even though she explicitly associates her with "Varietie," which clearly goes against the virtues that Antissia as "a firme wife" should profess. As with Niobe, Antissia unwittingly identifies with the 'wrong' classical figure. Her inappropriate outspoken praise of Venus and, by implication, sexual pleasures is thus in character, harking back to her excessive acting out of her negative emotions, i.e., jealousy, grief and vengeance, in the first part of the romance. Indeed, the whole episode of Antissia's mad authorship is

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framed in a context of nostalgia and remembering, as characters evaluate her behaviour in view of their past experiences with Antissia. This retrospective orientation of the episode invites readers to consider also Antissia's poetic performance in comparison to the first part of the romance. Both Fall and Paul Salzman have noted that Antissia's poems are not "mad" in that they are incomprehensible (Fall 265; Salzman, 'Mary Wroth's Urania Manuscript' 145–146). I would argue, however, that Antissia's poetic effort can be interpreted as a "mad" or at least a deeply flawed attempt to imitate or surpass Ovid because, rather than the *Heroides* or *Metamorphoses,* Antissia chooses the 'wrong' Ovidian text model, i.e., Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, where Ovid invokes Venus, the "Queene-borne of the sea" (67), as his muse.

As Heather James has shown, the importance of Ovid's work as a point of reference for early modern English writers can hardly be overstated, and his works were associated as much with poetic eloquence and (political) resistance as with wantonness (*Ovid and the Liberty of Speech* 10–14). Not all Ovidian texts were seen as fit reading for young and female readers (cf. James, "Ovid in Renaissance English Literature" 423), but what James calls Ovid's "gendered complaint" (*Ovid and the Liberty of Speech* 59) in the *Heroides* offered a model of resistance to political and/or patriarchal oppression that could also be appropriated by women writers (cf. also 235–236).[10] Wroth's creative engagement with Ovid in the *Urania* plays out on different levels. Whereas Antissia's echoing of Ovid realises male educators' worst fears, Wroth's adaptation of two tales from the *Metamorphoses* aligns her with other early modern women writers who not only laid claim to the same classical authorities as male writers of the period but also "talked back to" Ovid (James, *Ovid and the Liberty of Speech* 235) and thereby both carved out an authorial space for themselves and perpetuated Ovid's authorial afterlife, as envisioned by Ovid himself at the end of the *Metamorphoses*.

The *Urania* contains numerous explicit allusions to the *Metamorphoses*,[11] but it is rare that Wroth rewrites entire tales. The two exceptions are the reworking of the tale of Caunus and Byblis in the first part of the

[10] On the importance of the *Heroides* to early modern literature see also Laurel Fulkerson (88).

[11] In an unpublished paper presented at the 2016 Renaissance Society of America conference in Boston, Lamb listed allusions to Echo and Narcissus, Alpheus and Arethusa, Daphne and Apollo, Iphis, Argus, Niobe, Cyparissus, Narcissus and Byblis, as well as Ariadne and Medea from the *Heroides* ("Classical Precedents for Author Figures in Wroth's *Urania*: Pamphilia, Sappho, and Ovid"). I am grateful to Mary Ellen Lamb for sending me her conference paper.

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Urania (518–526), that is, before the episode of Antissia's mad authorship, and a transformed version of the tale of Myrrha towards the end of the manuscript continuation (*U2* 310–313), i.e., after the Antissia episode under discussion.[12] In both cases, Wroth's rewriting radically differs from Ovid's version regarding the female characters involved. In Ovid, Byblis and Myrrha are metamorphosed because they fall in love with their brother and father respectively and seek to consummate their love, or even do so in Myrrha's case. By contrast, the female characters in the *Urania* actively try to avoid an incestuous act at all costs, even if they ultimately pay with their lives for their virtuousness. Thus, Wroth transforms two stories of transgressive female lust into tales of female suffering and martyrdom, making them undergo a generic shift, so to speak, towards the elegiac mode of the *Heroides,* which can be seen as counterbalancing Antissia's imitation of Ovid's wanton texts.

To achieve this effect, Wroth changes and inverts elements of plot, motivation and context, thereby freeing the female characters from any suspicion of guilt. In her rewriting of Caunus and Byblis' story,[13] for example, Wroth has the couple fall in love with each other without knowing that they are half-brother and -sister. The attraction between the two is therefore mutual and tragic rather than guilty, whereas in Ovid, Byblis knows the identity of her brother and is fully conscious of the illicit nature of her desires. Moreover, as soon as the couple in the *Urania* learn about their parentage, Wroth explicitly states that "the comparison" to Caunus and Byblis "holds not clearly" (*U1* 525) because they relinquish their dream of marriage and live chastely next to each other in the wilderness until they die shortly after. Instead of undergoing an Ovidian metamorphosis, their bodies are miraculously preserved in the tradition of hagiographic legends—another sign of their virtuousness—and their father erects a fanciful tomb for them. Byblis, by contrast, cannot restrain her desires and repeatedly tries to seduce her brother although he continually rejects her. She runs after him when he finally flees her and is metamorphosed into a fountain due to her incessant tears. It is evident that compared to Ovid's Byblis, the two lovers in the *Urania* are paragons of

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12 I have discussed the significance of Wroth's adaptations of these two tales from a thematic and plot perspective elsewhere (Orgis 197–199). On Wroth's engagement with Ovid and particularly the *Metamorphoses*, see also Roberts' introduction to the first part of the *Urania* (*U1* xxxiii–xxxv) and Macdonald's discussion of *Love's Victory*. For other early modern women writers' use of Ovidian texts, see James (*Ovid and the Liberty of Speech* 436– 439).

13 For an alternative reading of this episode, see Zurcher (72–75).

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virtue, and the text invites readers to join the protagonists within the romance in their admiration and commiseration of these unhappy lovers, whose tragic tale is commemorated and preserved in the form of a book in their funeral monument (519). Wroth's depiction of incest thereby becomes ambivalent because, on the one hand, it is treated as absolutely inadmissible, but, on the other, the couple's love for each other is presented as innocent and exemplary. As a result, it is not a brother's passionate love for his sister or vice versa that is condemned as monstrous, but the attempt to consummate such a love.

This is, however, exactly what happens in Wroth's rewriting of Myrrha's tale—with the crucial difference that it is not the daughter, called Lydia, who wishes for a union with her father, but Demonarus, the father, who lusts after his daughter. Whereas Myrrha's nurse in the *Metamorphoses* helps her realise her desires, Lydia's mother refuses to do the same for her husband and tries to flee with her daughter. Myrrha also flees from her father, but only after he discovers her to be his unknown lover and seeks to punish her. Her flight is partly successful in that she manages to escape her father, though she is subsequently transformed into a myrrh tree. The flight of Lydia and her mother, by contrast, ends in multiple tragic deaths: Demonarus catches up with them and kills them both as well as his son, who, unarmed, tries to defend them. As Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld remarks, the description of Demonarus' thrusting his sword through Lydia's body blurs the boundary between sexual penetration and martial violence (150) and uncannily literalises the military metaphors with which a text like George Gascoigne's *Adventures of Master F.J.* denotes rape (Salzman, *Anthology* 61). Forced penetration literally signifies death, it seems. Finally, Demonarus even tries to kill his son's beloved, witness to the murders, but she escapes to a fountain and is transformed into a nymph, whereafter Demonarus commits suicide.

For both Ovidian tales, Wroth rewrites her source so radically that she produces counter versions of the original stories that vindicate women's virtue and chastity. Moreover, Wroth does not engage with little-known mythological figures but instead with female characters whose very mention serves as shorthand to designate unlawful lust, as shown by Glauce's contrasting of Britomart's love for Artegall to the passions of Myrrha, Byblis and Pasiphaë in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (3.2.41, 412).[14] Wroth's reworking of the stories of Byblis and Myrrha allows her to broach the delicate subject of incest in her romance and maybe also to

[14] On the importance of Ovid's Byblis and Myrrha for early modern plays featuring incest see Richard McCabe (92–95, 102).

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respond to depictions of incest in stage plays like *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612/1613, published 1623).[15] Perhaps one could even read the inverted tale of Myrrha as an allusion to Pandosto's incestuous desire for his daughter (Salzman, *Anthology* 197–204), which Shakespeare all but excised from *Winter's Tale* (1609-1611, published 1623, cf.5.1.222–227).[16]

To summarise, Wroth's appropriation of the Ovidian text goes beyond mere imitation and allusion: she uses it productively—within her romance and to engage with a wider literary context—and in a more socially acceptable way than Antissia to champion an ideal of female virtue and resistance to illicit sexual lust that challenges received stereotypical representations of women. Feminist critics might argue that Wroth's female characters conform to patriarchal social norms and that by rewriting Ovid's transgressive lustful female characters, Wroth is, in fact, reinscribing the very norms that limit women's expression and agency in her romance. Yet, if one focuses on Wroth's handling of her source, her transformations of the original texts are as bold and strategic as, for instance, Spenser's rewriting of the competition between Arachne and Athena in *Muiopotomos* (cf. James, *Ovid and the Liberty of Speech* 42–51). Seamlessly integrating the Ovidian adaptations as minor episodes within her romance with only minimal references to the classical sources for readers to pick up on, Wroth's engagement with Ovid also displays self-assured aristocratic sprezzatura and sophistication—especially if juxtaposed with Antissia's ostentatious and ill-advised poetic performances.

The episode of Antissia's mad authorship closes with Antissia's own retrospective recounting of her temporary madness to a female audience at a later point in the romance (*U2* 251–252). This account is perhaps the most problematic part of the episode from a feminist perspective because, after her water cure, Antissia uncritically echoes the male characters' condemnation of her behaviour—unlike Urania and Pamphilia earlier, who question the content and tone of the male characters' remarks (34–35). Antissia's engagement with male authoritative voices hence remains passive and imitative, just like her imitation of her tutor's poetry. The water cure does restore Antissia's sense of decorum and shame, making her realise that she failed to live up to her social duties in her treatment of

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15 Cf. Rosenfeld for a discussion of Wroth's use of periphrasis to avoid the actual term "incest" (149–150).

16 Wroth was presumably familiar with *Winter's Tale* since it was performed in 1613 as part of the celebrations for the wedding of Elizabeth Stuart to Frederick V, Elector Palatine, whom Wroth's father accompanied on their voyage to Heidelberg (Shakespeare 92; cf. Wroth, *U1* xl).

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Rosindy and her husband, but, as Salzman puts it, "this seems to be at the cost of not producing any more poetry" ("The Politics of Complaint" 150). After her cure, Antissia has not gained a better understanding of poetic craftsmanship, apart from the insight that "poetticall furie […] in true sence is distraction" (*U2* 251). She does not acknowledge her failure to study and abide by Aristotelian rules, but blames her distraction on her "idlenes with a unsteddy braine, mixt with a mulltitude of phansies," claiming that "Poetrie" is "a studdy able to unsettle a more serious braine then ever mine was" (251). She therefore takes all the blame on herself, finding fault in her limited mental capacities and not even mentioning the flawed instruction she received from her tutor. Finally, the text signals that Antissia's lack of critical self-reflection and modesty has not been thoroughly resolved by the water cure: Antissia still wants to be the centre of attention, even if this is achieved through self-humiliation, "willing for the most part to heere her self speake, and thinking all others like her self (which was no partiall dealing), of her minde, to admire her self" (250–251).

The episode of Antissia's authorship thus ends on as unsettling a note as it begins, ridiculing Antissia and inviting readers to laugh at her. Our unease, however, does not arise because the episode undermines female authorship per se, I would argue. It arises because Wroth's intervention in a wider theoretical discourse on poetry/literature is predicated on the derogation of the female character Antissia. In Wroth's reflection on the place, purpose and nature of literary production and on how to engage with canonical classical authorities as an early modern writer, Antissia comes to embody the cultural stereotype of a bad or even mad (woman) writer. On the negative side, Wroth thereby creates what Kim F. Hall calls another "system of power" (192),[17] which superficially reinscribes cultural stereotypes concerning women's limited mental capacities. On the positive side, Wroth's theoretical engagement with culturally prestigious classical theories of poetics and questions of literary imitation can be seen as an achievement and a bold move on behalf of a woman writer, especially if one considers the freedom with which Wroth appropriates Ovidian intertexts. In conclusion then, although Antissius claims that it is "a dangerous thing att any time for a weake woeman to studdy higher mat-

[17] Hall coins the term in her discussion of early modern women's implication in colonialist ideology by seeking to empower themselves through the distinction from supposedly inferior colonial others (192–193). A similar mechanism of self-promotion seems to underpin Wroth's authorisation as a writer at the expense of her character, Antissia.

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ters then their cappasitie can reach to" (*U2* 41), the emphasis in the episode is clearly on "a *weake* woeman" and does not question female authorship per se. However, as Antissia's case demonstrates, women—as well as men—with literary ambitions should beware of choosing the wrong poetic models to imitate, lest, in Antissia's words, their "heads" be "turne[d] … into the mist of noe sence" (251).

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