TALKING BACK TO CATULLUS: 
LADY MARY WROTH'S 
PAMPHILIA TO AMPHILANTHUS 13 

J. CHRISTOPHER WARNER 

IN LADY MARY WROTH'S SONNET SEQUENCE PAMPHILIA TO AMPHILANTHUS, frequent echoes of sonnets written by Wroth's father, Sir Robert Sidney, and by her uncle, Sir Philip Sidney, signal the extent to which Wroth found inspiration in the literary achievements of her family. But critics have also remarked how self-consciously Wroth's verse draws upon the Renaissance French and Italian, and classical Roman poetic traditions. Sonnet 1 of Pamphilia to Amphilanthus, for instance, evokes the opening of Petrarch's Tronfe d'Amore, and its vision of a goddess putting into the poet's breast a "hart flaming more than all the rest" has been recognized as an image borrowed from the opening sonnet of Dante's Vita Nuova.¹ May Nelson Paulissen, furthermore, has persuasively shown that Wroth, like Ben Jonson, was influenced generally by the styles and themes of the Greek and Roman lyricists—especially Horace and Catullus (32–77).

When interpreting individual sonnets written by Lady Mary Wroth, however, we are not inclined to look for a sonnet or other poem that was her particular model or that hers in some way "answers" or invokes in order to reinvent. The reason we do not is obvious: the vast stock of sonnet-copia was so continuously recycled in and between the European and English languages, was so pervasively "in circulation" within literate culture, that we take it for granted that Wroth as much as any other sonneteer drew on this poetic material as freely and naturally as others did Ciceronian periods for their prose. That is why, in this essay's suggestion that we can perceive a direct connection between two poems—not actually between one of Wroth's sonnets and another, but between one sonnet by Lady Mary Wroth and one of the genre's classical precursors—I know I have as much reason to beg for my readers'
indulgence as I do to hope for their credence. Nevertheless, I will hazard to argue that Wroth wrote *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* 13 against Catullus 51, and that her aim was to controvert what Joan DeJean has fittingly termed Catullus’s “masculinization” of his Greek source, Sappho’s fragment 31, “He seems to me equal to the gods” (37–38). Wroth’s sonnet, from this perspective, is seen to endeavor a restoration of the Sapphic female voice to the love lyric, asserting the validity and dignity of female passion in poetry by reclaiming from a long and male-centered poetic tradition what was, way back in time, first the passion and the voice of a woman. For in Catullus 51, Wroth would have recognized that Sappho’s passion and voice were trivialized by the process of an unfriendly translation. To reclaim them for *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, so I suggest, Wroth challenges the male orientation of Petrarchan poetics by going back, long before Petrarch, and talking back, to Catullus.

I.

The complex character of Wroth’s writing in and against poetic tradition, above all, has occupied Wroth scholars, whose studies strive to articulate precisely how, in Barbara Lewalski’s words, Wroth “claims the Petrarchan tradition for an English woman poet and gives voice and subjectivity to a sonnet lady” (252). Much of the best criticism on *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (as well as on *Love’s Victory* and *The Countesse of Mountgomeriies Urania*, for that matter) aims to characterize the nature of Wroth’s revisions of the traditional male identity of the poet-lover, her explorations of female power in the dynamics of courtly and courting ritual, and even her invention, so it has been proposed, of a new feminine poetics.

But these studies have conspicuously not included analysis of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* 13, “Deare fammish nott what you your self gave food; / Destroy nott what your glory is to save,” nor of the other three sonnets in the sequence (6, 21, and 26), in which the speaker likewise addresses her beloved directly and begs him for his “pity.” Instead, critics reasonably have concentrated on the very large majority of the sonnets that are marked by their reticence about