



Margaret P. Hannay. Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth

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Margaret P. Hannay. *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth*.

Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010. xxxiv + 363 pp. index. illus. chron. bibl. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6053-8.

In *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth*, Margaret Hannay has given us another exquisitely researched biography of another writing Sidney woman. Like the life of Pembroke, Sidney's sister, this biography of Wroth (who was Sidney's niece) breaks an immense amount of new ground while covering history we thought we knew well. The title of Hannay's book on Pembroke, *Philip's Phoenix*, justly marks out her importance as Philip's sister; she published his work and also finished the psalms he had started, while also completing a number of important translations. Wroth, the niece, stands on her own as Mary Sidney, although Hannay points out that she was in fact far less well known as a writer than her illustrious aunt during her day. But because she wrote original prose fiction while her aunt only wrote a few original poems along with numerous translations, Wroth herself conforms far more closely to our sense of a proper writer. It is also important to stress that she also wrote about what it was like to write as a woman, and such a protofeminist self-consciousness has fed into much recent writing on the *Urania*, her prose romance fiction, her sonnet cycle *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, and her masque, *Love's Victory*.

Hannay does Wroth a great service by finding proof that she was not quite as scandalous as she has seemed. Although she had two illegitimate children with her first cousin, William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, she and her children were accepted by the Sidney family and also by Pembroke's brother, the fourth Earl of Pembroke. Hannay has tracked down these children, and has found persuasive evidence that Wroth became a grandmother before she died, when her daughter Katherine Herbert gave birth.

One of the most interesting effects of reading the biography is how much it feels like a reading of Wroth's *Urania*, close-packed as it is with incident, travel,

family relations, deaths, births, court appearances, visits, poetry, and parties. As Hannay sagely observes, we have more information about Wroth's childhood than just about any other Jacobean at this time, because of the many letters exchanged between Sir Robert Sidney, Governor of Flushing in the Netherlands, and his wife Barbara Gamage, who was often left at Penshurst in Kent to care for their growing family. As the eldest child of eleven Sidney siblings, Wroth was one of only three to make it into adulthood, although many of her sisters and brothers lived to adolescence and were married into other important Jacobean families. There are clear parallels between these siblings and both Urania's and Pamphilia's families, and their interrelationships, marriages, and friendships are equally complicated and dense in both fiction and reality. One of the scandals that lived on into Margaret Cavendish's day concerned Wroth's use of an unfortunate moment in the life of the Hay family; she was famously castigated by Edward Denny for having written about it; he called her, most memorably "Hermaphrodite in show, in deed a monster." His poem lived, and while she answered him in kind, calling him an "Ass," his critique was more famous and it has since become too perfect a proof of the strictures against women's writing to be ignored by modern scholars. Hannay does an able job, however, of pointing out that many of Wroth's women friends wrote in many different modes. She was not the only writing Jacobean woman, though her work survives in far greater quantities. One of the wonderful possibilities Hannay leaves open is the hope that scholarship might discover this work in the future, including more work by Wroth.

Hannay ably analyzes the perils of applying the details of Wroth's fiction to her biography, as Wroth, like most fiction writers, embellished the fictional versions of actual events greatly and Hannay often cautions how important it is to understand where reality ends and fantasy begins. But it is also clear that the texture of an aristocratic woman's life is faithfully represented in the fiction: births, deaths, illnesses, baptisms, marriages, heartbreaks, murders, travel, masques, and court appearances all reveal what life is like in a ruling elite whose business it is to reproduce itself, maintaining and expanding property.

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