



# **The Sidney Family Romance: Mary Wroth, William Herbert, and the Early Modern Construction of Gender**

*Gary F. Waller*

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William Herbert (1580-1630), third earl of Pembroke, and Lady Mary Wroth (1587-1653) were first cousins, the nephew and niece of Sir Philip Sidney, whose family was one of remarkable literary and political importance.

Herbert was a poet, a voluminous letter writer, and one of the Jacobean court's richest and most powerful courtiers and politicians. Wroth was arguably the most important woman writer of the period; she authored the first Petrarchan poetic sequence, the first prose romance, and one of the first plays in English by a woman. In addition to their connections as cousins and as writers, they were lovers and the parents of two illegitimate children.

The Sidney Family Romance is both a "cultural biography" and a symptomatic reading of the sexual and textual relationships of Herbert and Wroth. Waller's analysis of their letters and literary works relies on a variety of critical apparatuses-social history, current political and social theories of the Jacobean period, and most notably (feminist)

psychoanalytic theory. In both his biographical information and interpretive

comments, Waller focuses on subject construction and gender construction of the

early modern period, to find that Herbert's

poems proceed from his life at court to engage in the gender politics of Petrarchan

poetry, while Wroth's work proceeds from her disempowered position to project a desire for an autonomy which would lead to mutuality between the sexes.

Waller tries to find ways of analyzing the "inner lives" of his subjects, in the absence of direct evidence, and with a paucity of documentation. He examines historical documents, including the writings of the two

cousins, and recent historical research, along with contemporary studies of family interactions and gender construction and detailed case histories drawn from nearly a century of clinical and therapeutic studies. The author concludes with a discussion of the crisis of gender in the seventeenth century as a contemporary crisis as well.

Family history has long been central to Renaissance studies. The Sidney Family Romance proceeds far beyond any previous

works in bringing to bear the very rich and

complicated network of ideas, observations,  
and literary images in the works of Herbert  
and Wroth.

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