Contingent Desire:  
Love and the Paradox of Petrarchanism

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No, no, no, no, my Deare, let be.  
Stella to Astrophil, “Fourth Song,” Astrophil and Stella

Stella’s response to Astrophil, above, after 85 of the 108 sonnets in Astrophil and Stella, is trademark Petrarchan. According to Petrarchan convention, the (male) lover pines and plains after his (female) beloved, woos and whines, and is largely unsuccessful. In fact, the lover thrives on lack of success; what would be the point of singing of a consummated love? Petrarchan love by definition strives against all odds, is single-minded, cannot be thwarted, and persists in spite of—indeed is motivated by—discouragement, woe, and mishap. By some standards, then, this seems the best kind of romantic love: immutable, apparently uncontingent. In this essay, however, I explore the paradox at the heart of Petrarchanism, the very contingency of romantic love in early modern England. Love as represented in English Renaissance poetry and prose emerges as mediated, dependent, politicized, tenuous, threatening, and insufficient. Deviating quite a bit from ideals of romantic love, these representations yet coexist with grand literary versions of Love; indeed these cohabit with the greatest of love poetry as its dark nether self. In the Petrarchan and post-Petrarchan Renaissance—during the Elizabethan court, through the sonnet boom of the 1590s, and taking a post-Petrarchan turn in the Jacobean court—“love” retains its Janus-faced ambiguity. I examine
the erratic and contingent nature of romantic love as expressed in Sir Philip Sidney and Lady Mary Wroth by examining three key moments in their texts, and further examine the gendered differences in the two writers. I begin with one of Sidney’s most Petrarchan sonnets (#45) from *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), then consider a scene in Sidney’s *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (1593), and conclude with a discussion of Wroth’s *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* (1621).

In current usage, “contingent” conjures up “dependent” as its closest synonym, so that a “contingent desire” would be unable to stand on its own but would require the presence of some thing else or of some other conditions. On the one hand, this seems eminently natural: desire cannot stand solo and does indeed rely upon the presence of others, or at least of one other: the object of desire itself. On the other hand, to attach contingency to desire seems to denigrate the hallowed fiction of Love, a fiction in which literature has been one of the most egregious conspirators. *The Oxford English Dictionary* adds, to the idea of dependence, obsolete or currently underused definitions to the notion of “contingency,” meanings that expand this definition but do not surprise us. Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) is quoted as containing the passage: “Columbus did not find out America by chance, but God directed him...it was contingent to him, but necessary to God,” to illustrate the definition “happening or coming by chance; not fixed by necessity or fate; accidental; fortuitous.” A 1475 *Book Noblesse* is cited to provide the example: “It were but as contingent and of no necessite, that is to sey, as likely to be not as to be [sic]” to illustrate “of uncertain occurrence or incidence.” Following these examples and our current use of the word, I define a “contingent desire” as one that is uncertain, dependent, unreliable, accidental, mediated, and subject to change. During the height of Petrarchanism in England, in short, literary representations of love often depicted a collapsing, uncertain, contingent love which seems at once entirely contradictory to the idea of