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Complaint and Constancy in Whitney's "The Copy of a Letter"

In my paper, I want to explore the interplay between three "circles of complaint" in Isabella Whitney's "The Copy of a Letter": personal, gendered, and societal. The movement between these different levels creates a complex conversation about the private and public effects of relationship troubles. This conversation often focuses on the ideal of constancy, applied both to the personal relationship and to larger structures of morality. In the first circle, at the heart of the poem, Whitney's narrator levels specific complaints against her "unconstant lover," striking a careful balance between various arguments: resignation at the lover's choices, reminders of their past relationship, confidence in her own worth, and concern about the future. She both reprimands the unnamed lover for his lack of constancy and asserts her own moral and emotional stability. On the second level, Whitney's speaker uses examples, mostly from classical mythology (specifically Ovid's *Heroides*) to create an apparently stark contrast between the constancy of women and fickleness of men. But the inclusion of exceptions to both rules complicates this gender stereotyping. The poem's third circle explores issues of cosmic justice, questioning why faithless men are spared the consequences of their actions. But it also investigates the challenges readers face in interpreting poetic and historical events accurately, especially when those events have been passed down with specific meanings attached to them. On all three levels, Whitney asserts herself as both a constant lover and a critical reader of people and texts.

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Milton and the Femininity of Complaint

This paper will explore Milton's multiple uses of the form of complaint using both male and female voices, but focusses in particular on Adam's long lament in Book 10. In particular, I will explore the ways in which Milton plays with the Ovidian model from Eve's refraction through the figures of Narcissus and Echo in Book IV through to the variations on the ethopoeic voice in Books 9 and 10. What is at stake in having a male speaker occupy a subject position culturally coded as feminine? Does Milton have in mind one of the male speakers of the *Heroides* (or later complaints – e.g. Drayton's *English Heroical Epistles*)? What, specifically, about this complaint, is Ovidian, beyond its conceptual frame? This question of subject position is crucial, as the gender of the speaking subject fundamentally frames the speaker's relationship to authority, potentially troping Adam as the bereft and abandoned lover, whose fundamental connection to the world has been severed, condemning him (as for the heroines of Ovid's – and later – epistles) to loss, exile and lack of identity. Yet his position is not predicated on sexual violation or loss of reputation, neither is it straightforwardly a plea for redress. It seems likely that Milton identifies Adam's position of abjection with the feminine – and it is worth exploring this gendering alongside Milton's other female speakers in the poem. There are other key questions and parameters to be explored as well, a number of ways in which the form of complaint – and taking into account the specific markers of complaint – can enhance our reading of Adam's speech in Book 10. Milton's use of the complaint form in *Paradise Lost* will be set alongside the long tradition of

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arguing *in utramque partem* in relation to Eve's innocence/guilt found within the woman debate, and subsequently taken up in various forms by women writers over the course of the seventeenth century, notably Aemilia Lanyer and Lucy Hutchinson.

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**“Darkness Visible”:
Heresy and Female Empowerment in Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus***

Clare McManus observes that “[B]lackness is a marker of difference closely connected to [Queen] Anna's performance career” (75). Anne of Denmark's liminal position as a foreign consort was marked by an escort of black performers who lead her into the city of Edinburgh in her first coronation. But while the motif of blackness was used in her coronation in order to underscore the feminine and foreign as markers of difference, it became increasingly employed over time as an emblem of her exclusion. This shift in meaning becomes obvious in the festivities that celebrate the baptism of her first son, Henry, in 1594. The entertainments surrounding the occasion of the christening set blackness, religious difference, and femininity in close thematic proximity. These entertainments enact exoticism, religious diversity, and femininity as elements to be suppressed or expelled. That the same color motif is adopted in Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* at the Queen's instruction indicates her ownership of it in order to repurpose it.

In much the same way, Mary Wroth uses the theme of blackness in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* in order to press complaint into political service. Kim Hall has explored the racialized terms of Wroth's sonnet sequence, but I want to explore how race and religious difference become the signatures not just of outside status but also of female empowerment. It has been suggested that the image of the Indians “scorched with the sun,” in Wroth's Sonnet 19 (Folger V.a.104) are derived from her participation in the controversial masque performance. Pamphilia's love for Amphilanthus is commonly described in pagan terms (“The sun which they do as their God adore”). I mean to show how these terms are used to signal the release of the female subject from cultural and political norms. Wroth is one, like Anne, “who thus to blackness run[s]” in order to exploit the powers of outside status.

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Militant Complaint in Margaret Cavendish's *Bell in Campo*

In *Bell in Campo*, the complaints of women left behind in war time become the complaints of grieving war widows, one who pines for her husband and another who bemoans her exploitation at the hands of a new husband. Cavendish juxtaposes these scenes of complaint with depictions of a new female army whose military competence surpasses that of the existing male army. The army of women essentially emerges from – or perhaps truncates what begins as – complaint, with Lady Victoria issuing a call to arms in her fury at being transported, for her safety, away from her husband and the battlefield.

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Addressing her troops, Victoria asserts: “I make no question but that our army will increase numerous by those women that will adhere to our party, either out of private and home discontents, or for honour and fame” (58). While the “Generalless” ostensibly identifies two very different motivations for enlisting (51), I propose to explore how “discontent” and “honour and fame” intertwine in the mode of complaint. “Honour” was interchangeable with “pride” in some contexts, but as a cardinal sin, “pride” was often feminized in the period, sometimes in contradistinction from definitions of masculine honour. A recurring explanation of sinful pride in moral tracts described it as mistaking one’s place in relation to others, an error to which women were thought to be especially prone. This definition resonates with Lady Victoria’s troops assuming a place on the battlefield, where they seek “renown” in addition to redress for wrongs (55), despite the men’s insistence that the women do not belong there. Complaint, I posit, notwithstanding a plainant’s potential wretchedness and vulnerability to interpretation, emerges from a sense of self-worth, an assertion of discrepancy between what the plainant merits and what she has received. It thus participates, I hypothesize, in the gradual shift from notions of pride as a particularly feminine sin to more positive understandings of pride as legitimate self-assertion.

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Complaint, the Common, and Forms of Resistance:
Drayton’s *Matilda*, Whitney’s *Whitney*

Lynn Enterline writes about what she calls the “ventriloquism” at the heart of Ovidian narrative—of “speaking beside oneself” as its central rhetorical position. That rhetorical space of voices in chorus, or in conflict, or in conversation, animates my inquiries into the English complaint poem as it evolves across the sixteenth century. The fracturing of voice can be either disempowering or empowering, creating either suffering or community, or both at once. In this paper, I look at two poems—Isabella Whitney’s 1573 “The Manner of Her Will” and Michael Drayton’s 1594 *Matilda*—in terms of various concepts of a ventriloquized common, which can be social or linguistic forms of ventriloquism. Whitney’s common is social: it is the political commons, often represented in earlier satire and complaint as the dispossessed rural poor. Whitney brings that tradition into an urban complaint, establishing a network of city-wide bonds as part of her “utopian hopes,” as Crystal Bartolovich has called them, of an urban commons (though she never uses the word “common” in the poem). Drayton’s poem *Matilda* invokes a linguistic commons, largely through the process of “commonplacing” lines or passages in his printed text, pointing to their extra-textual value (either in origin, or for a reader’s later use). The poem’s power comes from this accumulation of voices both outside and inside its complaining narrator. The complaint, generically, creates a particular kind of language history, where, in response to a moment of traumatic pain, personal memory and social memory become inseparable. Remember them, remember us, remember me. Whitney and Drayton both create a balancing of personal and common memory, and in so doing express both personal affect and resistance.

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Remaking Complaint in Mary Wroth's *Urania*

Complaints in the Sidneian tradition carried a potentially political charge. That Wroth herself understood this is clear from an episode of *Urania* in which Nallinia's "complaint . . . made an insurrection" against the tyrant Lansaritano (98). And Pamphilia's rendition of "Lindamira's Complaint," argues Rosalind Smith, combines satiric complaint with complaint against the times to make a bid for Wroth's reinstatement in the Jacobean court at a time of acute political crisis (Rosalind Smith, *Sonnets and the English Woman Writer 1560-1621: The Politics of Absence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 109-18). Smith's compelling reading makes sense of the speaker's emphasis on the "Justice" of her case and the "Jealousie" ("zeal" or "indignation") of her final stance (502, 505). Yet Lindamira's complaint appears at the end of Book 3. Earlier in the romance Wroth offers a powerful critique of the genre: if Perissus seeks to rescue his own deep grief from "Sighs with complaints" that "have poorer paines outworne" (2), *Urania* urges him to "Leave these teares, and woman-like complaints" (15). I suggest that Wroth revisits Elizabethan elegiac complaint with its pitiable female figure of anguish and loss to expose its ideological underpinning and revise it for the Jacobean moment. Deployed by Spenser, Drayton, Browne and Daniel as an emblem of political injustice, the female-voiced complainant, however voluble, herself usually remained powerless. Reanimating this figure in both *Urania* and Pamphilia, who initially refuse to disclose or ameliorate their pain and cannot rely on a male narrator to do so, Wroth represents a succession of complaining female avatars in both poetry and prose who gradually learn to emulate her masculine plainants by sharing their complaints and unashamedly seeking redress. Building on the politically charged complaints of her Sidneian forebears, Wroth subjects them to critique and rewriting to further her Jacobean political agenda.

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Women's Complaint, Authorship, and Attribution in Manuscript Miscellanies

The European Research Council-funded project "RECIRC: The Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women's Writing, 1550–1700" is a collaborative, interdisciplinary effort to develop a large-scale quantitative account of the ways early modern women's writing was read and transmitted. My research for the project has focused on the manuscript miscellany. In the last three years, I have consulted more than six hundred miscellanies, and I have documented the contents and attribution patterns of those that contain works by or attributed to women in the period.

Attribution and prosopopoeia have proven more complicated than I might have expected. Although approximately 64% of the items in the miscellanies I have consulted have been anonymous, with the remainder attributed with names, initials, aliases, and pseudonyms. These attributions are often false, but they are not always intentionally misleading. This paper

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will consider several female-voiced complaint poems that appear in miscellanies whose compilers appear to have taken seriously their attributions women. It will situate the poems in the contexts of the miscellanies in which they appear and in broader manuscript circulation to assess the extent to which compilers distinguished between prosopopoeia and female-authored writing. It will inform a larger chapter about attribution practices and the construction of authorial roles for women in manuscript miscellanies.

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Women in Scottish Reformation Satire

My paper will explore the use of women's voices in a group of poems familiarly known as "Satirical Poems of the Time of the Reformation" (published 1891 by the Scottish Text Society [STS] and edited by James Cranstoun). I have been working with this corpus and on other propaganda associated with Mary Queen of Scots for longer than I care to remember; I am currently producing a new edition of these poems for the STS. Printed on broadside from roughly 1567-1573, the poems comment on the political upheaval that followed the murder of Lord Darnley, second husband of the Queen of Scots. Most of the poems can be attributed to the elusive and largely anonymous poet Robert Sempill, who wrote at the behest of Queen Mary's enemies.

In the past, I have been interested in and have written about Sempill's use of women's voices: his favorite *nom de plume*, for example, is Maddie of the kale market, a canny, well-informed Edinburgh wife who listens carefully to the word on the street, spreads political news and gossip, and counsels and scolds accordingly. In another related piece of propaganda, 'The Dialogue of the Twa Wyfeis', two wives are overheard in an Edinburgh tavern criticizing the supporters of the Queen. In other words, women – wives, in particular – appear frequently in this material and are often the conveyors of specific political opinions.

I have not given as much thought to the lamentations of women, who voice their distress about the civil conflict engulfing Scotland in the early 1570s. For this paper, I would like to explore the use of 'Lady Scotland', or 'Scotland, your kindly mother' in several poems. I hope to contextualize this poetic choice in a period marked by the overthrow of a Queen accused of sexual and moral indiscretion.

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Complaining Patience and Patient Complaint

In an epistolary poem "bewaylynge her mishappes" (published in *A Sweet Nosegay*), Isabella Whitney contrasts complaint with patience. Complaint requires exhausting, ceaseless activity (bearing "heauie hartes" [1], living as "Mourners" do [6], spending nights "restlesse" [9]), but—the speaker suspects—does not bring about the same spiritual rewards as the more challenging "quietnesse" (21) of a life lived "pacientlye," accepting God's "wyll" (17-8). To conclude that complaint and patience are opposing tactics for coping with hardship is

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tempting, but my paper argues that they are actually related in the English early modern imagination: not the same, but close kin.

If we imagine a spectrum of conventional early modern responses to hardship running from most passive to most active, we would find patience (with its etymologically inborn passivity) on one end and physically violent, vengeful rage on the other. I argue that complaint lies next to patience on this spectrum—and both are more active, or at least resistant, than they may seem. For all its association with passivity and “quietnesse,” for example, patience, like complaint, hopes for results and achieves them through affective power. Readers of Chaucer’s *Griselda* know this well; Shakespeare’s usurping Duke Frederick fears that Rosalind’s “silence and her patience / Speak to the people, and they pity her” (AYLI 1.3.78-9). *Patientia vincit*.

Patience conquers, however, only when it is a response freely chosen by the sufferer. Its affective power vanishes when it is falsely *imposed*, in which case complaint must literalize patience’s power to “speak” and help the speaker reclaim her own narrative of pain from those who would silence it. Shakespeare’s *Lucrece*, ordered by Tarquin to accept his assault “with patience” (486), is an extreme example of a character who regains power over her self-narrative through complaint. My paper explores these and other complicated links between patience and complaint in early modern English texts by and about women (rather than focusing on standalone “complaint” texts, I examine instances of complaint and patience embedded within various narratives; interactions between the two are often plainer in these cases).

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**Complaints and Grievances:
Isabella Whitney’s *The Copy of a Letter***

Isabella Whitney’s poetry has long been located within ‘homely’ traditions of vernacular poetry, most notably by Jill Ingram in her study of ‘Wyll and Testament’ and the mock testament. *The Copy of a Letter* similarly is read within a popular rather than courtly mode of complaint. Whitney’s recrafting of Ovidian complaint through the rather more prosaic *querelle des femmes* is certainly evident in the way *The Copy of a Letter* was marketed. Yet, what other non-elite figurations of the female voice were available to Whitney alongside the *querelle*? Early Tudor ballads and carols provide examples of non-elite female-voiced and debate poetry, with female and male interlocutors, in which gender relations are negotiated not through feudal courtly conventions, but through the more homely terms of the conduct of men and women and rituals of association within households and neighbourhoods. English carols that look back to the *chanson de malmariée* are voiced by ‘gossips’ who leave their homes to meet at the tavern where they complain of domestic violence or take the form of debates fuelled by marital discord. In mid-sixteenth-century ballads, the terms of complaint have shifted to contracting a marriage, and often what constitutes a promise to marry. In these ballads, the motility of complaint is evident in the slippage between the love lament, with its account of abandonment, and the expression of a grievance that holds open the possibility of litigation. Initiated by a broken promise, Whitney’s *The Copy of a Letter* takes part in this

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soundscape, domesticating the *Heroides* through the homely vocabulary of sixteenth-century complaint poetry.

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**“We will mourn with thee:”
Voiced and Unvoiced Complaint in Titus Andronicus**

The genre of complaint in English Renaissance poetry attempts to foreground the voice of an aggrieved woman. While the content purports to champion a female perspective, one cannot ignore the fact of an often male author behind it. While not resolving this disparity, in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare at least addresses the formal irony of men ventriloquizing female complaint. Lavinia pleads on her own behalf to the Goth Queen turned Roman Empress Tamora, but her strong voice is silenced and her trauma manifests through a pronounced absence of her hands, her tongue, and her voice. Discovering her in the forest, her uncle Marcus launches into a lament on her behalf and much of the play's second half is taken up by men attempting to recover Lavinia's voice not for her benefit but for their own. In a moment of intertextuality, Lavinia is able to reverse the ventriloquy by claiming the words of another male author, Ovid, to reflect a complaint that she cannot give on her own. By consciously introducing Philomel as Lavinia's double, Shakespeare is able to draw a distinct contrast between the complaint imagined in the male perspective (those being chiefly economic) in detached text and the firsthand experience of trauma and loss embodied by the unvoiced Lavinia. The absence of such direct complaint opens a void filled insufficiently by the complaints of Marcus and Titus and thus invites speculation from audiences who witness the traumatized Lavinia on stage about the nature of her injury, one which, perhaps, could not be sufficiently put into words. While much scholarship has been devoted to the voiceless Lavinia, this paper will look to that semiotic void as a version of the complaint poem, throwing into sharp relief the limits of male authors to represent women's trauma.

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**Woes shared:
Women and Complaint in Dialogue**

As an early modern poetic mode, complaint is often marked by open-endedness, irresolution, and the unmitigated isolation of its speaker. Complaint tends to "amplify the speaker's grief" and "enlarg[e] on the affective impact of loss," "privileg[ing] irresolution, dilation and vulnerability rather than containment, control and mastery" (Smith, O'Callaghan, Ross). Complaint is also often indicated as a failure of dialogue: it is (as in the *Heroides*) one half of an epistolary exchange, or (as in the plaining petition of the lover) one side of an implied call and answer, the pain of "cry[ing] out unheralded" (James Harmer) essential to its affect. And yet a number of early modern complaints *are* answered, early modern complaint at times overlapping with the poetic dialogue poem, itself a "capacious" tradition that is "dizzily heterogeneous" (W. Scott Howard). This essay locates complaint in dialogue, and explores a particular (and relatively rare) sub-category of complaints-in-dialogue: those engaging two

female voices. Focal examples include Anne Bradstreet's *A Dialogue Between Old England and New* and Hester Pulter's "A Dialogue between Two Sisters, Virgins, Bewailing Their Solitary Life," and it touches on Echo as a familiar complaint figure that (I will argue) can be seen as a female response to female complaint. This essay is in part an enquiry into form - what happens when female complaint meets dialogue - and, more particularly, an enquiry into the emotional dynamic created when female complaint meets female response. If the complaining woman is a plangent figure of erotic, religious, and political loss in the period, what happens when she is framed in relation not to a male interlocutor but to a female? Exploring the emotional dynamic established when female complaint is answered by female consolation, mitigation, or amplification, the essay will argue for the poetic construction of a female community or "sympathy" of woes.

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**Subjects of Tragedy, Objects of Lament:
Female Complaint and *Richard II***

This paper will explore the connections between Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the tragic "female complaint" poems of the early 1590s that feature female characters from British history (e.g. Samuel Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond*, Thomas Lodge's *Tragicall Complaynt of Elstred*, Michael Drayton's *Matilda*). I will suggest that these poems employ recursive and self-reflexive language, linguistic repetitions and echoes, and images of mirroring surfaces to articulate an ideal of affective responsiveness between tragic objects and sympathetic audiences, and that Shakespeare draws upon these same tropes and strategies in order to represent Richard as the self-conscious protagonist of a "lamentable tale" of complaint whom future audiences might view with more sympathy than do his own historical contemporaries. But while the female complaint poems hinge on male narrators tasked with telling the stories of the female figures whose voices they ventriloquize, *Richard II* closes by positioning the Queen as the person responsible for telling Richard's story and (in his words) "send[ing] the hearers weeping to their beds." What does Shakespeare's inversion of the female character-male narrator trope suggest about complaint's mediation of a "lamentable" historical past? How, for early modern writers, does complaint (en)gender tragedy?

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**"These thoughts have power":
Mariam's Complaint in *The Tragedy of Mariam***

Complaint offers a powerful lens through which to view the *The Tragedy of Mariam* and its ambivalent attitude toward women's speech, and, more specifically, Mariam's speech. Seeing Mariam as an orator of complaint helps explain why her voice is so feared by Herod and the chorus which seems to speak on his behalf, supporting the most conservative version of the status quo. While Salome is the most outspoken character and her speech boldly questions the double standard of divorce, the play focuses more on her racialized will than her "manipulation by the powerful" or complex ethical choices, making her voice less threatening in the world of the play. Alternatively, Mariam's speeches more closely fit the

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definition of complaint as an “emotionally charged, nuanced vehicle for expressing powerlessness or protest in response to loss and grievance” and as such are perhaps more threatening to those in power in their ability to draw sympathy and ethical considerations. Indeed, her refusal of Herod’s bed is represented as a reaction to his political tyranny in the murder of her relatives unlike Salome’s divorce which is represented as based solely on her own sexual desire. Mariam’s speeches, like complaints, “privilege irresolution, dilation, and vulnerability rather than containment, control and mastery,” making them a more likely vehicle for broad cultural critique and subject formation in and outside of the play. It is Mariam who speaks most clearly to Herod’s political machinations and ethical crimes. And while she remains vulnerable to him in death, she shifts her mode of complaint to a religious one, allowing her to find a consolation that eludes other characters.

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Love, Loss and Protest in Lady Mary Wroth’s *Urania* Poems

The prose romance *Urania* by Lady Mary Wroth contains a number of complaint poems scattered through its print and manuscript parts. These poems represent a major corpus by a woman writer representing the experience of love as loss, absence or wrong in the seventeenth century, and include a short sonnet sequence, *Lindamira’s Complaint*. This essay explores antecedents for Wroth’s female-voiced complaints, from Ovid’s *Heroides* through Spenser’s *Complaints* to complaints in popular and elite verse, in order to consider where Wroth’s poems might be located in a mode in which the parameters of female experience of love were already determined. How, for example, do these poems capitalise upon the rhetorical device of prosopopoeia? How are classical exempla mediated in the vernacular tradition, popular and elite, and how is this mediation apparent in Wroth’s relatively late intervention in the genre? What valency does complaint have as a political mode in the 1620s and beyond, and how do these poems recruit exempla from the recent and classical past to express injustice or redress wrongs? What is the relationship between women’s expression of erotic loss or grievance and their experience of political injustice, and how is this relationship formally negotiated? Wroth’s complaints exemplify Renaissance love gone wrong, one part of a long literary history that represents the costs – political, social and emotional – of certain narratives of love upon the vulnerable subject. Rather than isolated and belated examples of a woman writer’s participation in the mode, I argue that these poems harness a rich seam of classical and vernacular precedent to reimagine love in the 1620s and to reinvent complaint as a form through which love’s ‘losers’ might speak.

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Women’s Complaints and the Utopian Feminine/Feminist Sphere

While the best-known works in the Renaissance complaint genre are voiced by women, they are written by men. Women like Lady Mary Wroth did deploy the genre, but their writings are often viewed as adaptations or appropriations of male-authored poems by the likes of Sidney and Shakespeare. In this paper, I reframe the study of the female complaint by placing Wroth’s *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* into conversation with an anonymous late-

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medieval text written from a woman's point of view, *The Assembly of Ladies*. In both works, women's complaints about their losses in love serve as the foundations for affective, intersubjective female communities. They act as vehicles for a form of utopianism as they protest the injustices of the here-and-now and long for a future that thinks beyond sexual norms. In this way, these works offer a pre-history for what Lauren Berlant discovers in her work on popular women's literature, whose complaints voice women's disappointment in the "tenuous relation of romantic fantasy to lived intimacy" (2). However, just as Berlant finds that these female complaints, while enacting a form of protest, "maintain some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place" (2), I find that *The Assembly of Ladies* and the *Urania* depend on injustices against women to produce female community. By juxtaposing Wroth's writing with *The Assembly of Ladies*, I argue not for direct influence but rather for a genre of complaint that emerges from women's common responses to shared obstacles. My analysis will reveal a longer history of female complaint as a tactic through which women from the Middle Ages to the present enacted a utopianism that remained aware of its limits.