

Theatre Review: *Love's Victory*, Penshurst Place

In August WSG member and PhD student at Birkbeck College [Miriam al Jamil](#) went to the 'premiere' of [Lady Mary Wroth's](#) *Love's Victory* at Penshurst Place, Kent. She reviews it [here](#):

Inspired by a WSG notice, I obtained a last-minute ticket for the first ever professional performance of *Love's Victory* (MS transcription [here](#)) which was staged in the beautiful medieval Baron's Hall at [Penshurst Place](#) in Kent. Penshurst was the home of Lady Mary Wroth (1587-1651/3) whose prose romance *Urania* and sonnets are better known than this pastoral tragi-comedy, written between 1617 and 1619. It exists in only two manuscript copies, an incomplete Huntingdon MS and a Penshurst version on which the performance was based. The project to revive the play has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of Lancaster University's [Shakespeare and his Sisters](#) project which [Professor Alison Findlay](#) has been running for two years, and a film of the performance will shortly be posted on their website. It will be a valuable resource and interesting I am sure for many WSG members.

The gallery of the hall served as Venus's heavenly domain, from which she and Cupid observe the entangled trysts of four pairs of lovers, echoing aspects of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Venus demands that her power is respected and the complex web of the lovers' desires and misunderstandings is formed and untangled through rhyming couplets, in song and music. The lovers devise word games and singing competitions to while away the time. Each represents aspects of love, its fickleness and calculation, vulnerability and yearning. The dilemma of an arranged marriage makes all true love secondary, an offence to Venus which results in the tragic death pact of the true lovers Musella and Philisses in her Temple. The Penshurst MS provides the denouement of the plot which is missing in the Huntingdon version. Musella's mother is brought in and rebuked for making a forced marriage arrangement which has led to the death of her daughter. Her shame and grief convince Venus to reverse the tragic ending and restore the lovers to life again. So we all celebrate the joyful triumph of love. How could it be otherwise?

The language, arguments for love in all its aspects and guises framed in a pastoral setting was suitable entertainment for Wroth's private audience in her country house. It reflects traditions of courtly masque entertainments and aristocratic participation. Professor Findlay suggests it may have brought Wroth together with her cousin William Herbert if they both performed in the play. Certainly Mary entered into a relationship with William after her husband died. The final scene lays the blame for miserable marriages squarely on the mother and it is tempting to read Mary's personal story through the twists and turns of the plot. The performers gave energy and insight to their roles, and the evening was an encouraging contribution to the ongoing rediscoveries of women's skill and creativity to which we all subscribe at WSG. Interested readers may want to order the forthcoming [edition](#) of *Love's Victory* edited by Findlay and Michael Brennan once it is available on the Manchester University Press website.