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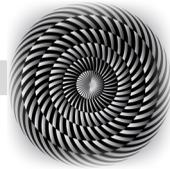


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WITH 174 ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY E. W. KEMBLE

## The Morality of Renaissance Love Poetry: The Case of Sir Thomas Wyatt



*Robert C. Evans*

The love poetry written in England from roughly 1500 to roughly 1660 is some of the most important verse in the English language. This is true for various reasons. First, love was an immensely popular topic in many different kinds of literature from this period. (See, for instance, Shakespeare's plays.) Therefore, what is written about love in, say, Renaissance drama often reflects many of the same ideas dealt with in the poetry of the time. Secondly, the love poetry of this era was immensely and demonstrably popular during the period itself. Renaissance poets enjoyed writing about love, and they enjoyed imitating and responding to each other's writings about this topic. This popularity of love as a theme, both among readers and writers from this era, can tell us a great deal about the values and mores of the entire English Renaissance. Moreover, Renaissance love poetry has remained widely read in the centuries since it was first produced. Arguably no other time or place in the history of writing about love, at least in the English language, produced so much or such memorable verse concerning erotic feelings and attitudes. Finally, because of its enduring popularity, Renaissance love poetry helped influence the ways subsequent readers and writers of literature in English have thought about the subject of amorous desire.

Often, I would argue, Renaissance love poetry tends to be misread and misunderstood because of a few basic mistakes that modern readers frequently make. First, they sometimes assume that the writer of the poem and the speaker of the poem are identical. They assume that Renaissance love poets were inevitably using their poems to articulate their own personal attitudes in very blatant and simple ways: If the speaker of a poem says *A*, then the writer of the poem must also accept *A*. If the speaker of a poem says *B*, then the writer of the poem must also agree with what the speaker has just said about *B*. But this is not always the case.

Secondly, I believe that we often miss much of the sheer comedy of Renaissance love poetry. We often take quite seriously what seems to have been meant in jest; we often impute to the poets the foolish, comic views of the poems' speakers. In short, we frequently miss the sheer hilarious irony of many Renaissance love poems—irony that makes the poems seem funny on one level but intriguingly serious on another. It is the irony of so many Renaissance love poems (I would argue) that gives them their real moral depth. By implicitly mocking the self-centered desires of so many of the poems' speakers, the writers of the poems implicitly endorse the Christian morality that was taken so seriously at the time. Most writers of Renaissance love poetry were demonstrably serious and committed Christians. They often wrote openly religious verse and prose even while also writing "love" poetry that can frequently seem irreligious unless it is read ironically. Understanding the irony of much of the love poetry, I suggest, is the key to understanding how so many sincerely committed Christians could write poetry that seems erotically frivolous. They were, in a phrase, teaching through ridicule—making serious moral points by using comic, implicitly satirical methods.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I plan to review the work of several other scholars who have made essentially the same points I have just expressed. I plan to deal with one of the period's most influential love poets (Sir Thomas Wyatt) and cite a few examples of some of the most relevant, most persuasive scholarship arguing that Wyatt often used irony to make his essentially moral points. I believe that Wyatt was far from alone in adopting this method to imply his serious moral views. Similar arguments could also easily be made about the poems of Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and many others.<sup>2</sup> Here, though, I have only enough space to deal with Wyatt, and even concerning Wyatt, I have only enough space to deal with a few representative poems.

### **Sir Thomas Wyatt**

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–42) was one of the most important poets of his time, partly because he was perhaps the first English poet

to translate Petrarch's Italian love poems into English. Petrarch's poems can themselves quite easily be read as ironic indictments of base, superficial, merely physical desire (see, for instance, the article by Luria in the "Works Cited" section). Indeed, the opening and especially the final poems in Petrarch's massive 366-poem sequence known as the *Rime Sparse* ("Scattered Rhymes") encourage this kind of ironic, ultimately Christian reading. By the end of the sequence, the poems' speaker freely admits that his earlier, merely lustful longings for the chaste and beautiful Laura (who in the meantime has died) were selfish, foolish, and shameful. The final poem in the sequence is an exceptionally long and exceptionally beautiful celebration of godly love as inspired and personified by the Blessed Virgin Mary (Petrarch 574-83).

Many of Wyatt's love poems are in fact straightforward translations from Petrarch, and there is every reason to think that Wyatt read these poems as Petrarch seems to have intended them to be read—as ironic mockery of the foolish, self-obsessed speaker. Wyatt's poem "The long love that in my thought doth harbor" is, for instance, a translation of the 140th poem of Petrarch's *Rime*:

The long love that in my thought doth harbor,  
And in mine heart doth keep his residence,  
Into my face presseth with bold pretense  
And therein campeth, spreading his banner.  
She that me learneth to love and suffer [5]  
And will that my trust and lust's negligence  
Be reined by reason, shame, and reverence,  
With his hardiness taketh displeasure.  
Wherewithal unto the heart's forest he fleeth,  
Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry, [10]  
And there him hideth and not appeareth.

What may I do when my master feareth

But in the field with him to live and die?

For good is the life ending faithfully. (Greenblatt 594)

In this poem, the speaker explains how Cupid (the god of selfish desire) has taken over his mind, taken up residence in his heart, and encouraged the speaker to reveal his desire to a beautiful woman. Typically, the self-pitying Petrarchan speaker blames the woman for teaching him how to “love and suffer” (5). (The suffering is one indication that his love is not genuinely selfless love of the woman’s spirit but rather selfish desire for the woman’s body.) She has taught him to “suffer,” in part, by rejecting his desires as lustful and by telling him that his lust should be “reined by reason, shame, and reverence” (7). Reason was often, in medieval and Renaissance literature, imagined as a rider who could and should rein in the horse of Passion. But shame (whether regarded as self-judgment, fear of judgment by others, and/or fear of judgment by God) could also effectively help control passion. Finally, “reverence”—perhaps for the woman, but especially toward God—was yet another means of keeping one’s selfish passions under control.

Thus the woman has been giving the lustful speaker three different ways (reason, shame, and reverence), which (used singly or especially in combination) can help him control his lust. She has “taken displeasure” with Cupid’s boldness, causing the coward Cupid to flee back to the speaker’s heart, where Cupid now cowers in fear and hides himself. The poem ends with a question that can easily be read as ironic: “What may I do when my master [Cupid] feareth, / But in the field with him to live and die?” This is a rhetorical question (a device commonly used in Renaissance love poetry) and can easily be answered in many different ways than the speaker seems to expect. The most obvious ironic answer is rooted in several assumptions: (1) God, not Cupid, should be the speaker’s master; (2) the speaker has no rational or moral obligation to remain loyal to Cupid (who symbolizes the speaker’s own selfishness and therefore is not *really* the speaker’s “master”); and (3) the speaker, with typical

self-pity, exaggerates when he suggests that the lady's rejection of his lust will lead to death, either literally or metaphorically. After all, rejecting lust is *not* the same as rejecting true, genuine love—the kind of love that he, apparently, fails to offer her. Finally, the poem ends with a line that can also easily be interpreted ironically: “For good is the life ending faithfully.” Yes, one might reply, it really *is* good, from a Christian perspective, to end one's life in faithfulness to the Christian god. But it is anything but good to end one's life in faithfulness to selfish desire (personified by Cupid).

Other love poems by Petrarch and translated by Wyatt are open to similar kinds of readings. For example, a poem that begins with “I find no peace” (Greenblatt 596) is full of typical Petrarchan phrasing implying that selfish desire (sometimes appropriately called *cupiditas* [cupidity]) leads to mental and emotional instability. Similarly, a poem beginning with “My galley” (Greenblatt 597) explicitly refers to Cupid as a “lord” who steers the metaphorical boat of the speaker's life and emotions “with cruelty” (3). The sonnet ends with lines that invite a moral, Christian response to the poem as a whole: “Drowned is reason that should me consort [i.e., accompany], / And I remain despairing of the port” (13-14). The speaker thus admits that his predicament is caused, in large part, by his failure to use reason to control his passions.

But even (or perhaps especially) the poems by Wyatt that are *not* translated from Petrarch help support ironic readings of his love poetry as a whole. A classic example is “Farewell, Love,” one of Wyatt's many original compositions:

Farewell, Love, and all thy laws forever,

Thy baited hooks shall tangle me no more;

Senec and Plato call me from thy lore,

To perfect wealth my wit for to endeavor.

In blind error when I did persevere,

[5]

Thy sharp repulse, that pricketh aye so sore,

Hath taught me to set in trifles no store,  
And 'scape forth since liberty is lever.  
Therefore farewell; go trouble younger hearts, [10]  
And in me claim no more authority;  
With idle youth go use thy property,  
And thereon spend thy many brittle darts.  
For hitherto though I have lost all my time,  
Me lusteth no lenger rotten boughs to climb. (Greenblatt 596)

In this poem, the speaker openly rejects both Cupid and cupidity. He spurns the lawless “laws” that Cupid promulgates (1). He refuses any longer to be baited like a stupid, unreasoning fish (although even fish have enough good sense, he implies, to refuse hooks unless they are hidden [2]). He announces that Seneca and Plato (a Roman and Greek philosopher, respectively, who symbolized the “virtuous pagans” whom Renaissance Christians admired so sincerely) are calling him from Cupid’s teachings and encouraging him to improve his ability to reason properly. He says that he has learned, partly from the pain he has suffered, to turn his back on “trifles” (such as mere physical attraction and attractiveness) and to escape from lust since emotional, mental, and spiritual freedom is better than selfish desires. He advises Cupid to go attack younger, more foolish men—men who have not yet learned the pains and self-destructiveness of cupidity. Finally, the poem ends with two lines that any serious Renaissance Christian could easily have endorsed: “For hitherto though I have lost all my time, / Me lusteth [i.e., I desire] no longer rotten boughs to climb.” Here, then, is one of numerous poems by Wyatt that seem to spell out quite explicitly the moral, Christian standards that can be used as yardsticks to evaluate the ideas expressed in the “ironic” love poems—the poems whose speakers seem to violate the very standards made explicit in poems such as “Farewell, Love.”

One of those ironic love poems—and perhaps the most famous love poem Wyatt ever wrote—is known as “They flee from me”:

They flee from me, that sometime did me seek  
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.  
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek  
That now are wild and do not remember  
That sometime they put themself in danger [5]  
To take bread at my hand; and now they range,  
Busily seeking with a continual change.  
Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise  
Twenty times better; but once in special,  
In thin array, after a pleasant guise, [10]  
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,  
And she me caught in her arms long and small,  
Therewithal sweetly did me kiss  
And softly said, “Dear heart, how like you this?”  
It was no dream, I lay broad waking. [15]  
But all is turned thorough [sic; “through”] my gentleness  
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;  
And I have leave to go, of her goodness,  
And she also to use newfangledness.  
But since that I so kindly [sic; kindly] am served [20]  
I would fain know what she hath deserved. (Greenblatt 599)

In this work, a male speaker recounts his frustration at having been abandoned by all the women (but one in particular) who used to take risks to search him out when he was, in the past, more attractive than he is now. They used to seek him “With naked foot stalking in [his] chamber” (2). They used to behave like domesticated animals (“gentle, tame, and meek” [3]), but now they are “wild and do not remember / That sometime[s] they put themsel[ves] in danger / To take bread at my hand” (4-6). Now “they range, / Busily seeking with a continual change” (6-7). In other words, in the eyes of these women, he has passed his “sell by” date. But at least he can remember the good times, and he particularly recalls the time when an especially daring woman—dressed “In thin array, after a pleasant guise [i.e., in a pleasant manner] / When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall”—sneaked into his room and made a pass at him. She actually “caught [him] in her arms long and small [i.e., slender],” sweetly kissed him, and then “softly said, ‘Dear heart, how like you this?’” (10-14). Evidently he liked it quite a bit because he is careful to reassure the reader that “It was no dream, I lay broad waking” (15). But now, he says with disappointment and frustration, that woman, along with all the others, has forsaken him. In fact, she has given him permission to get lost. She has given herself permission to seek out other men. The poem ends with two bitter lines in which the speaker wonders what kind of fate awaits the fickle woman since she has treated *him* so badly. Clearly he hopes that what goes around comes around and that she will suffer the same kind of abandonment she has caused *him* to suffer.

This poem is intriguing partly because it shows us a man experiencing treatment to which women were (and perhaps always have been) accustomed. He has been evaluated in purely sexual terms. He has been objectified. He has been treated merely as a thing to be used. Now that he is older and less attractive (and perhaps less vigorous and potent) than he once was, he has been abandoned. He has, in short, been treated like many of woman of his day (and before and since). And he has not enjoyed the experience. Although the women in the poem never actually say anything, their behavior speaks volumes.

## Donald Friedman on Wyatt

Donald Friedman, for decades a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley, has offered especially valuable insights not only into “They flee from me” but also into the nature of Wyatt’s poetry as a whole. In fact, Friedman’s discussions of Wyatt have broader implications for a better understanding of much love poetry of the English Renaissance. In a valuable article on “They flee from me,” Friedman contends that this poem typifies Wyatt’s common practice of creating a dramatic speaker who is distinct from the poet himself. Whereas many critics read Wyatt’s lyrics as if Wyatt is inevitably speaking in his own voice, Friedman argues that many of Wyatt’s poems are dramatic monologues (thus foreshadowing by four centuries the famous dramatic monologues of Robert Browning). Wyatt’s speakers are often, then, like characters in a play, and we should not immediately assume that they are expressing Wyatt’s own opinions. Instead (Friedman argues) Wyatt frequently uses his speakers to examine states of mind that Wyatt himself is implicitly commenting on or critiquing. For Friedman, “They flee from me” is a typical work by Wyatt because it is “a dramatization of the mind of an imagined figure” (3).

Friedman notes that by the time his own article appeared, “almost every [previous] essay” on Wyatt’s poem had been “based to some extent on the assumption that [in this poem] Wyatt is dramatizing his own feelings, perhaps even his own ‘real’ experience” (3). Yet Friedman also cites a number of prior critics who did intuit that Wyatt’s speakers are not necessarily speaking for Wyatt himself (3-4). It is Friedman, however, who develops this insight most fully. He argues that Wyatt’s poetry shows that this writer “is capable of dramatizing any state of mind and any kind of mind,” although he chooses “to remain, generally, within the limits set by the situations and preoccupations of the courtly lover’s existence” (4). Friedman believes that many of Wyatt’s poems imply a “critique of courtly love” psychology (4). In particular, “They flee from me” offers, according to Friedman, a “dramatic analysis” that “reveals a man whose sensibility has been warped by subservience to a code he has just learned is false and

impermanent” (4). The poem exposes “the moral consequences of the ethos of courtly love” (4). Wyatt implicitly criticizes not only the speaker but also the specific woman the speaker attacks and the whole “social milieu they inhabit” (4).

Friedman suggests that when we read the poem’s opening line, it “is difficult to separate the note of disbelieving surprise from something closely akin to self-pity” (5). Indeed, self-pity, I would argue, is a major part of the tone of this poem, of many other poems by Wyatt, and of numerous other poems by poets writing in the Petrarchan tradition. I do not, however, think we are usually meant to sympathize with the self-pitying speakers; rather, I think that we are often expected to find their self-indulgence funny (but also familiar, perhaps from our own behavior). Friedman believes that poems like “They flee from me” offer serious (if incomplete and impartial) self-examinations by speakers whom we are meant to take seriously. I agree in part, but I also think Friedman may underplay the sheer foolishness of this speaker and of many similar Petrarchan speakers.

Commenting further on the poem’s opening stanza, Friedman suggests that in these lines, the “reader is allowed to see that these flitting, elegant creatures of the court”—the beautiful women the speaker wistfully recalls—“behave like animals in their unthinking quest for gratification; the lover, imprisoned in the vocabulary of the courtly ritual of love, can see that truth only through the distorting medium of allegory” (7-8). I would suggest, however, that the speaker’s tendency to think of these women as animals tells us at least as much about him as about them: he is certainly no better, in his moral attitudes, than the women he now rebukes. He was willing to take his own kind of bread at their hands when they found him physically attractive. Now that they have rejected him, however, his tendency to think of them as animals carries more than a tinge of irony. His own views have not been especially humane, and his tone will become quite bitter as the poem concludes. In this text, no one (neither the women, the speaker, nor others in their milieu) comes off as morally admirable.

According to Friedman, the women who once pursued the lover “indeed are beasts; but they must still be regarded as morally responsible beings. Simply to call them beasts, even in an ironic joke, is to absolve them of that responsibility, to characterize them as “‘naturally’ faithless” (Friedman 8). The reader comes to realize that “the game” of courtly love “is only a mask for the pursuit of gratification; and the loss of gratification is, we come to understand, the cause of the [speaker’s] lament” (8). The speaker, then, is—in Friedman’s view—at least as much to blame, morally, as the women he criticizes. I agree with this analysis, but again I find the poem’s tone funnier than Friedman tends to regard it. Wyatt, I think, is having a good laugh at the expense of this speaker, the inconstant ladies and anyone else (including, perhaps, himself and his readers) who is ever tempted to behave as the people in this poem have acted. Their values and conduct are perhaps more farcical than tragic.

Especially persuasive is Friedman’s claim that the “rejected lover has failed to recognize that his cultivation of the seductive arts of ‘gentilnes’ in order to capture his sexual quarry has been matched in its selfishness and indirection by ‘their’ pretense of tameness” (8). No one, in this courtly game-playing, is displaying the kind of values that Wyatt, as a sincere Christian, would have endorsed; everyone involved is operating out of pure self-interest, and they do so in ways that make them all (but especially the speaker) seem a bit ridiculous. The poem implicitly invites its readers to reflect on their own values and conduct: do *we* ever behave selfishly? Of course we do. Therefore, the joke is as much on us as it is on anyone depicted in the poem.

According to Friedman, in this poem we

are presented with the spectacle of a man demoralized by his participation in a system of conduct which is revealed as little more than an elaborately woven guise for unregenerate animality. The edge and poignancy of the poem come from the pain of his discovery of the disguise; but what distinguishes the poem from other satiric attacks on the hypocrisy of the rules of courtly love is the fact that the critic

[i.e., the speaker] himself has not realized the degree of his implication in that hypocrisy. The genuine pathos of the poem, and the quality which gives it the power to sear the mind, grow from our perception that the man who speaks it is far more gravely deceived than he knows. (11)

Although I agree with this analysis, once again I wonder if the poem is not more comic than these comments may suggest. It is possible to read the speaker's self-deception as having "the power to sear the mind," but it is also possible to view his self-deception as foolish and funny (partly because it is so typically human). His self-deception itself, however, seems undeniable.

"They flee from me," in Friedman's view,

is simply Wyatt's most successful attempt to dramatize the moral predicament of the courtly lover. That predicament is seen as a state akin to madness, a mental state controlled by the fantasies of desire, one in which the lover's mind is helpless to reconcile its dreams of eternal passion, its knowledge of the reality of "doublenes" and change, and its need to believe in the possibility of permanence. (12)

Friedman finds in this poem a trait that, I think, appears in many of Wyatt's writings: an "unremitting concern with the inescapable responsibility for moral judgment" (13). Whether we severely judge the speaker or mostly laugh at him because we recognize his follies as our own (or perhaps some combination of the two) is up to each reader to decide. But Friedman's basic point—that Wyatt's poem has real moral implications—strikes me as a very valuable insight not only into this poem but into Wyatt's poetry in general. It is an insight that has real implications for much other Renaissance "love" poetry, especially poetry by writers in the Petrarchan tradition.

### **"My lute, awake!"**

One other important poem by Wyatt can be discussed in the space remaining. This text—"My lute, awake!"—is intriguing partly because of the transformation the speaker undergoes during the course of the poem. At first, he seems merely (and fairly comically) frustrated because he has been repeatedly turned down by the