

SIR THOMAS WYATT

c. 1503 – 1542

During Thomas Wyatt's brief, 39-year lifespan, English men and women served two kings; three lord chancellors were executed; England waged war in four other lands (Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and France); and Henry VIII married five of his six wives, most of whom met sorry ends. Wyatt lived his entire adult life in service to the court, amidst the political intrigue and turmoil that accompanied the reign of King Henry VIII, and was twice imprisoned in the Tower of London. A few of his poems portray an idyllic life in the countryside away from the machinations of the king and his courtiers, yet they can carry a subtext about the ambient political disorder or the court's political dramas. One of his most famous poems, "Whoso list to hunt," based on a sonnet written by Petrarch (1304–74), is thought to express longing for Anne Boleyn, Henry's future second wife. Wyatt wrote in many poetic forms, but he is best known for the artistry of his satires and songs and, along with Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–47), for introducing the Italian sonnet to England.



Son of Anne Skinner and Sir Henry Wyatt, Thomas Wyatt was born in 1503 into wealth and status at Allington Castle in Kent, England. His later career as a statesman followed that of his father, as did his political trials and tribulations. Henry Wyatt had been imprisoned and tortured for over two years by the court of King Richard III for his loyalty to the Tudors. When Henry Tudor became King Henry VII, the elder Wyatt was made a Privy Councillor, and he was later knighted by Henry VIII.

Although it is not certain, it appears that Thomas Wyatt entered St. John's College, Cambridge at age twelve, and that he may have graduated by the age of sixteen. He was a man of many accomplishments, adept at music and poetry as well as politics, and he soon became a valued member of King Henry's court. After serving in various minor positions, Wyatt began his diplomatic career in 1526 with missions to France, Rome, and Venice, where, we may surmise, he acquired his knowledge of Italian sonnets. (At about this time Wyatt became estranged from his wife, Elizabeth Brooke, daughter of Lord Cobham, whom he had married at a young age.) He was knighted in 1536 but soon afterward had his first falling out with King Henry and was imprisoned in the Tower of London. Wyatt might have been under suspicion of having had an affair with Anne Boleyn when she was still unmarried; Henry VIII had divorced Catherine of Aragon for Boleyn and thereby provoked England's break with the Roman Catholic Church. Although Anne and five (almost certainly wrongly accused) lovers were all executed, Wyatt was released after a month.

Most of Wyatt's work to this point had been love poems, often containing themes of disappointment or unrequited love but rarely dark in tone. By contrast, poems written after his imprisonments can express bitterness.

Wyatt eventually regained both the king's favor and his diplomatic status. Unfortunately, though, he lost a great ally upon the fall and execution of the statesman Thomas Cromwell, in 1540, and in 1541 he was imprisoned again, this time on trumped-up charges of treason. Once again he was spared and was briefly in favor with the king. Wyatt succumbed to fever the next year, however, and died in Dorset in 1542.

Few of Wyatt's poems were printed in his lifetime, but many appeared in Richard Tottel's 1557 volume *Songes and Sonettes* (later to become known as *Tottel's Miscellany*); a third of the volume is made up of Wyatt's work. Some years later, the Elizabethan critic George Puttenham summarized Sir Thomas Wyatt's importance to the English literary tradition in terms that remain broadly accepted today: "[Wyatt and Surrey] travailed into Italie, and there tasted the sweet and stately measures and stile of the Italian Poesie as novices newly crept out of the schooles of Dante, Arioste and Petrarch. They greatly polished our rude & homely maner of vulgar Poesie, from that it had been before, and for that cause may justly be said the first reformers of our English meetre and stile."

[Please note that additional poems by Sir Thomas Wyatt appear in the Elizabethan Sonnet and Lyric section elsewhere in the volume.]



SONNETS¹

10²

The long love that in my thought doth harbour
And in mine heart doth keep his residence
Into my face presseth with bold pretence
And therein campeth, spreading his banner.
5 She that me learneth^o to love and suffer
And will^o that my trust and lust's negligence
Be reined by reason, shame,^o and reverence,
With his hardiness^o taketh displeasure.
Wherewithal unto the heart's forest he fleeth,
10 Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,
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.
—1557

29³

The pillar perished is whereto I leant,
The strongest stay of mine unquiet mind;
The like of it no man again can find—
From east to west still seeking though he went—

¹ SONNETS For additional sonnets by Sir Thomas Wyatt, please refer to the Elizabethan Sonnet and Lyric section in this anthology.

² 10 This poem is an adaptation of sonnet 140 from Petrarch's *Rime sparse* (*Scattered Rhymes*), also translated by Wyatt's friend Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey.

³ 29 An imitation of Petrarch's *Rime* 269. There has been some speculation that Wyatt here laments the execution of Thomas Cromwell, Wyatt's former patron.

5 To mine unhap,^o for hap^o away hath rent *misfortune / chance*
Of all my joy the very bark and rind,
And I, alas, by chance am thus assigned
Dearly to mourn till death do it relent.^o *abate*
But since that thus it is by destiny,
10 What can I more but have a woeful heart,
My pen in plaint,^o my voice in woeful cry, *complaint, lament*
My mind in woe, my body full of smart,^o *pain*
And I myself, myself always to hate
Till dreadful death do cease my doleful state?
—1557

31

Farewell, Love, and all thy laws forever.
Thy baited hooks shall tangle me no more.
Senec⁴ and Plato call me from thy lore
To perfect wealth my wit for to endeavour.⁵
5 In blind error when I did persevere,
Thy sharp repulse, that pricketh ay so sore,
Hath taught me to set in trifles no store
And 'scape forth, since liberty is lever.^o *dearer*
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^o no longer rotten boughs to climb. *desire*
—1557

⁴ Senec Seneca, a Roman essayist and philosopher (c. 4 BCE—65 CE).

⁵ wealth Well-being; wit Intellect; endeavour Exert.

EPIGRAMS

38

~~A las, madam, for stealing of a kiss
 Have I so much your mind there offended?
 Have I then done so grievously amiss
 That by no means it may be amended?
 5 Then revenge you, and the next¹ way is this:
 Another kiss shall have my life ended.
 For to my mouth the first my heart did suck;
 The next shall clean out of my breast it pluck.
 —1557~~

48²

~~Vulcan³ begat me; Minerva⁴ me taught.
 Nature my mother; craft nourished me year by year.⁵
 Three bodies⁶ are my food. My strength is in naught.⁷
 Slaughter, wrath, waste, and noise are my children dear.
 5 Guess, friend, what I am and how I am wrought:
 Monster of sea or of land or of elsewhere?
 Know me and use me, and I may thee defend
 And, if I be thine enemy, I may thy life end.
 —1557~~

60

~~Tagus,⁸ farewell, that westward with thy streams
 Turns up the grains of gold already tried,⁹ *refined*
 With spur and sail for I go seek the Thames,
 Gainward⁹ the sun that show' th her wealthy pride⁹ *toward*~~

¹ *next* Nearest, most convenient.

² 48 This riddle was titled “Description of a gun” when it was first published in *Tottel's Miscellany*. The poem's first six lines are a translation of a Latin riddle found in *Bombarda*, by Pandolfo Collinutio.

³ *Vulcan* The Roman god of fire and metal working.

⁴ *Minerva* The Roman goddess of war, as well as wisdom.

⁵ *Nature ... year* I.e., the materials come from nature, but are formed through craft.

⁶ *Three bodies* The ingredients of gunpowder.

⁷ *is in naught* I.e., the “O” of the gun's mouth.

⁸ *Tagus* River in Spain, where Wyatt spent several months as a diplomat. The Tagus is known for its gold colored sand.

⁹ *Gainward ... pride* Unlike the Tagus, which flows westward, the Thames flows “against” the sun's path, or eastward.

~~5 And to the town which Brutus sought by dreams¹⁰
 Like bended moon doth lend her lusty^o side. *pleasant*
 My king, my country, alone for whom I live,
 Of mighty love the wings for this me give.
 —1557~~

BALLADS

80

~~They flee from me that sometime did me seek
 With naked foot stalking^o in my *treading softly*
 my chamber.
 I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek
 That now are wild and do not remember
 5 That sometime they put themself in danger
 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,
 10 In thin array after^o a pleasant guise,^o *in accordance with / style*
 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?”
 15 It was no dream; I lay broad waking.^o *wide awake*
 But all is turned, through my gentleness,
 Into a strange fashion of forsaking.
 And I have leave to go of her goodness,¹¹
 And she also to use newfangledness.^o *inconstancy*
 20 But since that I so kindly¹² am served,
 I would fain^o know what she hath deserved. *gladly*
 —1557~~

¹⁰ *the town ... dreams* London. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Brutus, a Trojan hero and descendant of Aeneas, was visited in a dream by the goddess Diana and told to sail to the cliffs of Albion, where he could build another Troy. When he landed, he proceeded inland and founded the city that became London.

¹¹ *I have ... goodness* I have her permission to go from her.

¹² *kindly* Naturally, according to natural laws (i.e., that women are fickle). The word also ironically suggests the modern “with kindness.” Tottel amends this to “unkindly,” removing the irony.

94

Blame not my lute, for he must sound
Of this or that as liketh° me.
For lack of wit the lute is bound
To give such tunes as pleaseth me.
5 Though my songs be somewhat strange,
And speaks such words as touch thy change,¹
Blame not my lute.

pleases 40

My lute, alas, doth not offend,
Though that perforce he must agree
10 To sound such tunes as I intend
To sing to them that heareth me.
Then though my songs be somewhat plain
And toucheth° some that use to feign,²
Blame not my lute.

comments on 5

15 My lute and strings may not deny,
But as I strike they must obey;
Break not them then so wrongfully,
But wreak° thyself some wiser way.
And though the songs which I indite°
20 Do quit° thy change with rightful spite,
Blame not my lute.

avenge
compose
requite

Spite asketh spite, and changing change,
And falsed faith must needs be known;
The faults so great, the case so strange
25 Of right it must abroad be blown.°
Then since that by thine own desert
My songs do tell how true thou art,
Blame not my lute.

proclaimed

30 Blame but thyself, that hast misdome
And well deserved to have blame;
Change thou thy way so evil begun,
And then my lute shall sound that same.
But if till then my fingers play
By thy desert their wonted way,
35 Blame not my lute.

Farewell, unknown, for though thou break
My strings in spite with great disdain,

¹ *change* Change of heart.

² *use to feign* Tend to lie or to hide their real feelings.

Yet have I found out for thy sake
Strings for to string my lute again.
40 And if perchance this foolish rhyme
Do make thee blush at any time,
Blame not my lute.

—1557

SONGS

109

My lute, awake! Perform the last
Labour that thou and I shall waste,
And end that I have now begun;
For when this song is sung and past,
5 My lute, be still for I have done.

As to be heard where ear is none,
As lead to grave in marble stone,³
My song may pierce her heart as soon.
Should we then sigh or sing or moan?
10 No, no, my lute, for I have done.

10

The rocks do not so cruelly
Repulse the waves continually
As she my suit and affection,
So that I am past remedy,
15 Whereby my lute and I have done.

15

Proud of the spoil that thou hast got
Of simple hearts thorough° Love's shot
By whom, unkind, thou hast them won,
Think not he hath his bow forgot,
20 Although my lute and I have done.

through

20

Vengeance shall fall on thy disdain
That makest but game on earnest pain.
Think not alone under the sun
Unquit° to cause thy lovers plain,°
25 Although my lute and I have done.

unrequited / to lament

25

³ *As to ... stone* When sound is heard where there are no ears to hear it, or when lead (the softest metal) is able to engrave on stone.

May chance¹ thee lie withered and old
 The winter nights that are so cold,
 Plaining in vain unto the moon.
 Thy wishes then dare not be told.
 30 Care then who list,^o for I have done. *likes*

And then may chance thee to repent
 The time that thou hast lost and spent
 To cause thy lovers sigh and swoon.
 Then shalt thou know beauty but lent,
 35 And wish and want as I have done.

Now cease, my lute. This is the last
 Labour that thou and I shall waste,
 And ended is that we begun.
 Now is this song both sung and past.
 40 My lute, be still, for I have done.
 —1557

123

*V. Innocentia
 Veritas Viat Fides
 Circumdedderunt me inimici mei²*

Who list^o his wealth^o and ease retain, *desires / well-being*
 Himself let him unknown contain.^o *keep*
 Press not too fast in at that gate
 Where the return stands by disdain,³
 5 For sure, *circa Regna tonat.*

The high mountains are blasted oft
 When the low valley is mild and soft.

¹ *May chance* It may chance that.

² *V. Innocentia ... mei* This is a rebus, a puzzle in which Wyatt has arranged words to suggest a phrase. Translated from Latin, the rebus reads:

W[yatt] Innocence
 Truth Wyatt Faith
 My enemies surround me.

It is believed that Wyatt wrote this poem in 1536, while he was imprisoned in the Bell Tower. In May of that year, Wyatt may have witnessed Anne Boleyn's execution from his cell.

³ *Where ... disdain* From which your forced exit will be disdained.

⁴ *circa Regna tonat* Latin: [He] thunders around thrones. This line, referring to Jupiter, is taken from Seneca's *Phaedra*. The first two stanzas of Wyatt's poem are imitations of lines from that play.

Fortune with Health^o stands at debate.^o *well-being / odds*
 The fall is grievous from aloft.
 10 And sure, *circa Regna tonat.*

These bloody days have broken my heart.
 My lust,^o my youth did them depart, *pleasure*
 And blind desire of estate.^o *high status*
 Who hastes to climb seeks to revert.^o *fall back down*
 15 Of truth, *circa Regna tonat.*

The Bell Tower showed me such sight
 That in my head sticks day and night.
 There did I learn out of a grate,^o *barred window*
 For all favour, glory, or might,⁵
 20 That yet *circa Regna tonat.*

By proof, I say, there did I learn:
 Wit helpeth not defence too yerne,^o *willingly*
 Of innocency to plead or prate.⁶
 Bear low,⁷ therefore; give God the stern.^o *tiller*
 25 For sure, *circa Regna tonat.*
 —1969 (written 1536)

EPISTOLARY SATIRES

Mine own John Poyns,⁹ since ye delight to know
 149⁸
 The cause why that homeward I me draw
 (And flee the press of courts, whereso they go,
 Rather than to live thrall^o under the awe *enslaved*
 5 Of lordly looks) wrapped within my cloak,
 To will and lust^o learning to set a law, *pleasure*
 It is not because I scorn or mock
 The power of them to whom Fortune hath lent
 Charge over us, of right to strike the stroke;

⁵ *For all ... might* Regardless of one's favor, glory, or might.

⁶ *Wit ... prate* Intellect does not help one to earn a defense, or to plead or prattle of one's innocence.

⁷ *Bear low* Keep yourself in a humble position. Also a nautical term meaning "sail with the wind."

⁸ 149 This poem is an imitation of *Satira 10* (1532), by Luigi Alamanni.

⁹ *John Poyns* A fellow member of the court of Henry VIII and a friend of Wyatt's.