

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

‘But I, that knew what  
harbred in that hed’:  
Sir Thomas Wyatt and his  
Posthumous ‘Interpreters’

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IN NOVEMBER 2003, the body of Francesco Petrarca was disinterred. This was not the first time the bones of this famous poet had been disturbed. Nineteenth-century scientists had already exhumed them, but Italian pathologists were now eager to apply modern technology to reconstruct the poet’s face and create a definitive portrait for the seven hundredth anniversary of his birth.<sup>1</sup> This lecture examines our impulse to pick over the bones of our dead poets by looking at the case of Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder, a translator and imitator of Petrarch, long credited with being the first English poet to introduce the sonnet into our vernacular. It explores why it is that Wyatt’s commentators have recurrently excavated his poetic remains, searching for answers about the man who wrote them. It does so by analysing the seemingly confessional nature of Wyatt’s poetry, before proceeding to argue that—rather than being self-revelatory—Wyatt’s works actually resist and evade such self-exposure, especially when compared to the Petrarchan tradition on which he was drawing.

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,1186654,00.html>> [accessed 17 Sept. 2007].

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Thomas Wyatt died in October 1542, from a fever contracted whilst hurrying to meet a Spanish envoy at Falmouth.<sup>2</sup> His untimely passing—in his late thirties or early forties—prompted a flurry of elegies.<sup>3</sup> Strikingly, two appeared in print, at a time when printed obsequies were rare and seem to have been reserved for the death of royalty.<sup>4</sup> Funeral verses by John Leland and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey mourn a mere gentleman.<sup>5</sup> They do so—above all—because he is a poet, elevated alongside Dante and Petrarch, revered above Chaucer.<sup>6</sup> Despite their shared project, however, there are revealing differences between the two elegists. Leland's twelve-page pamphlet commemorates Wyatt's varied roles. Its thirty Latin verses focus on different aspects of his life, praising him—in separate poems—as a friend, ambassador, soldier, local landlord, or bearded bald man.<sup>7</sup>

Where Leland presents external evidence for Wyatt's character, Surrey, in contrast, anatomises the dead poet, breaking him down into constituent body parts. He performs a blazon, a standard poetic technique whereby the qualities of the object under perusal—usually a woman—are listed. Such catalogues of female virtue are generally restricted to what can be seen or heard: coral lips, golden hair, white skin,

<sup>2</sup> Colin Burrow, 'Wyatt, Sir Thomas (c.1503–1542)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com>> [accessed 18 Dec. 2007].

<sup>3</sup> These include verses by Sir Anthony St Leger, Sir Thomas Chaloner and John Parkhurst, see Kenneth Muir, *Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool, 1963), p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> The two extant printed elegies before 1542 are on Henry VII and his uncle and surrogate father, Jasper Tudor, Duke of Bedford: [*Elegy on the death of Henry VII*] (London, Wynkyn de Worde, 1509), *The epitaffe of the moste noble & valyaunt Iasper late duke of Beddeforde* (London, Richard Pynson, 1496). Henry was born at Jasper Tudor's castle in Pembroke after the death of his father. R. S. Thomas, 'Tudor, Jasper, duke of Bedford', *ODNB* [accessed 18 Dec. 2007].

<sup>5</sup> [Henry Howard *et al.*], *An excellent Epitaffe of Syr Thomas Wyat, with two other compendious dytties* (London, John Herford for Robert Toye [n.d.]); John Leland, *Naeniae in mortem Thomae Viati equitis incomparabilis* (London, Reyner Wolfe, 1542).

<sup>6</sup> Bella suum merito iacet florentia Dantem.  
Regia Petrarchae carmina Roma probet.  
His non inferior patrio sermone Viatus  
Eloquij secum qui decus omne tulit.  
(Leland, *Naeniae*, sig. A3<sup>v</sup>; for a translation, see Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 264.)

A Hand that taught what might be saide in rime  
That reffe Chaucer, the glorie of his wytte [. . .]  
([Howard], *Excellent Epitaffe*, sig. A1<sup>v</sup>.)

<sup>7</sup> Caesariem iuueni subflauam contulit: inde  
Defluxit sensim crinis, caluumque reliquit.  
Sylua sed excreuit promissae densula barbae.  
(Leland, *Naeniae*, sig. A5<sup>r</sup>; for translation, see Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 267.)

an angelic voice.<sup>8</sup> Surrey's blazon of Wyatt, however, peels back the flesh, exposing each body part as the site of a different attribute: his breast, virtue; head, wisdom; visage, a certain blend of Stoic morality; hand, his poetic talent. He presents Wyatt as a figure whose inner qualities can be laid bare, an open book in death as in life, when his 'persinge looke dyd represent a mynde | Wythe vertue fraught, reposed, voyde of guyle' (sig. A1<sup>v</sup>). Surrey stabilises Wyatt's posthumous image, removing its contours and rough edges; there is no evidence here, for example, of his imprisonment for killing a man in a brawl eight years earlier,<sup>9</sup> or of his membership of what Susan Brigden has called a 'high-rolling gambling fraternity at court'.<sup>10</sup> By the end of Surrey's elegy, Wyatt has become Christ-like, dying for the sins of his fellow men, who have failed to realise his worth: 'Sent for our welthe, but not receavyd so. | Thus for our gylte this Juell have we lost' (sig. A1<sup>v</sup>). Circulating beyond a coterie of manuscript readers, the printed elegy thus serves to monumentalise Wyatt, fixing his reputation.

Certainly Surrey's saintly Wyatt sets the pattern that others followed: Leland's elegies celebrate 'spotless Wyatt' ('candido [. . .] Viato', sig. A3<sup>r</sup>) and his 'severer studies' ('seueriora', sig. A3<sup>v</sup>)—a tendency to highlight the moral seriousness of Wyatt's poetry that we find fifteen years later in Richard Tottel's preface to *Songes and sonettes* (1557). In this first major printed collection to contain Wyatt's poetry, the printer praises 'the weightinesse of depewitted sir Thomas Wyat the elders verse'.<sup>11</sup> The nineteenth-century clergyman G. F. Nott was to cling gratefully to these posthumous eulogies when faced with the task of discussing his subject's sexual probity. 'We hear of no charges against him by his enemies on account of immoral conduct', he insists, suppressing Wyatt's self-accusations in his letters to his son in 1537: 'on the contrary he was universally spoken of as a man whose life was irreproachable; and as the tenor of his writings shews him to have been of a pious and an eminently religious turn of mind, we may fairly conclude that his behaviour never at any time occasioned public scandal.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Shakespeare's parody of this convention in Sonnet 130, 'My mistres eyes are nothing like the Sunne', *Shake-speares Sonnets* (London, G. Eld, 1609), sig. H4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> In May 1534, Wyatt had been imprisoned in the Fleet for his part in a fight in which one of the London sergeants was killed. Burrow, 'Wyatt, Sir Thomas'.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Brigden, "'The Shadow that You Know": Sir Thomas Wyatt and Sir Francis Bryan at Court and in Embassy', *The Historical Journal*, 39:1 (1996), 1–31 (at 17). As Brigden notes, 'both Bryan and Wyatt were listed in Edward Seymour's accounts of his gaming debts'.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Howard *et al.*, *Songes and sonettes* (London, Richard Tottel, 1557), sig. A1<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> G. F. Nott (ed.), *The Works of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and of Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder*, 2 vols. (London, T. Bensley, for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816), 2. xvii.

The twin legacy of Surrey's elegy is thus the enduring image of 'vprighte' Wyatt, and a Wyatt whose personality is readable—through his 'persinge look' (as it was for Surrey)—but through his work, 'the tenor of his writings'.<sup>13</sup> Surrey's claim in another commemorative poem—'I [. . .] knew what harbred in that hed'—is one that generations of critics have sought to emulate.<sup>14</sup> From the first edition of Wyatt's collected poems, produced by G. F. Nott in 1816, critics and editors have confidently asserted their ability to find the writer in the work.<sup>15</sup> Nott, for example, buttressed his text of the poems with historical evidence. The work is prefaced by a 'memoir' of Wyatt; his notes on the poems recurrently posit biographical readings;<sup>16</sup> and the collection ends with a hodgepodge of historical documents, including deeds of exchange; Wyatt's account books from his embassy in Spain; and the description of a Christmas joust in 1525. These appear in a string of appendices, left to stand without commentary, as if the connections between the poems and the historical detail were obvious. Indeed, such is Nott's reliance on the poetry for biographical evidence that he cannot believe that Wyatt ever

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Cf. Nott on his whitewashing of Wyatt's sexual mores in his observations on l. 13 of 'They flee from me' ('sweetly she did me kiss'): 'The propriety of this image depends in great measure on a circumstance which grew out of the manners of the days of chivalry, and which is now forgotten' (2. 546). The commentary on the ending of 'So feeble is the thread' (when the poetic speaker imagines the woman placing the poem between her breasts) strikes a similar, if strained, note: 'Wyatt seems so confident that his strains would be graciously received that it will be pleasing to believe they were addressed to his wife.' For Wyatt's letter to his son, see Muir, *Life and Letters*, pp. 38–41 (at p. 40). Wyatt was also accused of consorting with courtesans by Edmund Bonner (see Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 67), but Nott probably did not know of this, since Bonner's accusations were not made widely available until J. Bruce printed them in *Gentleman's Magazine* (June 1850), pp. 565–8. However, as Nott reprinted Wyatt's letters to his son, he must have been aware of his confession that 'folly and unthriftnes that hath as I wel deseruid, broght me into a thousand dangers and hazards, enmyties, hatrids, prisonments, despits and indignations' (Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 40).

<sup>13</sup> Howard, *Excellent Epitaffe*, sig. A1<sup>v</sup>; Nott (ed.), *Works*, 2. xvii.

<sup>14</sup> Howard, 'Dyuers thy death doe diuersly bemone', *Songes and sonettes*, sig. D2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Unlike subsequent nineteenth-century editions—such as *The Poetical Works of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (London, William Pickering, 1853)—Nott's edition does not simply reproduce Tottel's text, but also draws on manuscript sources (mainly BL MS Egerton 2711, 'the Egerton Manuscript', and BL Add. MS 17492, 'the Devonshire Manuscript'). Nott is here indebted to some extent to the lost edition prepared by his uncle, John Nott, four copies of which survive in proof (all copies of the finished edition were lost in a printer's fire).

<sup>16</sup> Nott suggests, for example, that 'The answer that ye made' is one of a group of poems 'written on the occasion of [his] separation from Anne Boleyn', a 'circumstance [that] would account for their being both obscure and unfinished. They might have been hastily written on the first impulse of feeling: though prudence had suggested afterwards the propriety of not finishing or making them public', Nott (ed.), *Works*, 2. 549.

went to Italy: 'it is extraordinary that if Wyatt did indeed travel into Italy, [. . .] that he himself should not have made some allusion to it in his poems', he writes, scoffing at Isaac Walton's claim that Wyatt knew Italy first-hand, proof of which—surviving in Henrician letters—has subsequently been pieced together by Susan Brigden and Jonathan Woolfson.<sup>17</sup>

That Wyatt's life-story should have captured critical attention is hardly surprising. It is the stuff of adventure. Imprisoned three times (narrowly avoiding execution on the latter two occasions, in 1536 and 1541); connected romantically with Anne Boleyn; sent abroad as the king's ambassador: the repeated rise and fall and rise of Wyatt's fortunes epitomise our perception of the cruel uncertainty of life at the court of Henry VIII, who seems to have grown increasingly irascible with the passing years and his mounting illnesses. It is therefore quite understandable that from the nineteenth-century 'rediscovery' of Wyatt onwards, consistent attempts should have been made to read his poems biographically, tying specific lyrics to key events in Wyatt's life—most notably the king's courtship of Anne Boleyn, her subsequent disgrace and execution. These attempts to *chercher* the poet (and with him, *la femme*) are exemplified by W. E. Simonds's endeavours in 1889 to produce a complete chronology of Wyatt's poems on the basis of crude analyses of metrical form and content. He divides the poems into periods of 'Protestation and Entreaty', 'Prosperity or Attainment', 'Disappointment or Deception', 'Disillusion and Recovery' and—more prosaically—'late poems', when an older, wiser poet finds more serious topics on which to write.<sup>18</sup> As Simonds writes:

We may remark that it was very natural for Wyatt, with his head full of the poetry of Italy, and possibly that of France, [. . .] to cast his eye around for another Laura or Diane, to whom he might dedicate the verse he was beginning to translate and to compose. If his choice happened to fall upon the brilliant and fascinating Anne Boleyn—and what thing more likely?—his verse would prove not at all unwelcome to this young coquette fresh from the Court of France.<sup>19</sup>

Wyatt is thus cast as an English Petrarch, and the woman at the heart of this narrative is, of course, Anne Boleyn.<sup>20</sup> The tenacity of this tradition

<sup>17</sup> Nott (ed.), *Works*, 2. xi; Susan Brigden and Jonathan Woolfson, 'Thomas Wyatt in Italy', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 58 (2005), 464–511.

<sup>18</sup> W. E. Simonds, *Sir Thomas Wyatt and his Poems* (Boston, 1889).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Sergio Baldi: 'Nineteenth-century scholars persuaded themselves that all of Wyatt's love poems were written for Anne Boleyn, though there is no evidence at all for this belief, and it is

is evident today on <[www.luminarium.org](http://www.luminarium.org)>, a web resource—now ten years old—much used by students, where a portrait of Anne Boleyn appears, without qualification, above the text of Wyatt's 'They Flee from Me', probably his best-known poem.

Simonds is undoubtedly an extreme case. However, he is not alone in either his desire to produce a chronology of Wyatt's poems,<sup>21</sup> or in reading the poetry as being 'intimately connected with Wyatt's own experience'.<sup>22</sup> As A. K. Foxwell wrote in 1913, Wyatt's verses 'attest [his] actual standard of life, and are the outcome of his convictions'; his '*life and work* is a song of harmony'.<sup>23</sup> Even after Roland Barthes announced the 'Death of the Author' in 1967, the search for Wyatt in his poetry has continued, a persistent trend highlighted in David Rosen's observation in 1981 that 'for the last fifteen years critics have tended to find in Wyatt's verse an expression of his personality'.<sup>24</sup> As Stephen Greenblatt wrote in 1980, in his still-influential *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Wyatt's poetry invites its 'audience [. . .] to experience the movement of the poet's mind through assurance, doubt, dread, and longing', in a 'painstaking rendering of the inner life'.<sup>25</sup>

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inspired only too obviously by Victorian romantic idealism. The intention was to make the poet almost into another Petrarch, with Anne Boleyn as his Laura', *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, translated by F. T. Prince (London, 1961), pp. 13–14.

<sup>21</sup> The literary 'cursus' Simonds constructs, as Wyatt moves from love lyrics to graver, more moral matters (i.e. his satires) then religious poetry (his psalms) is similar to that found in a milder, but persistent, form in the work of many Wyatt critics and editors, including Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson (eds.), *The Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool, 1969), where—despite the ostensible reliance on the order of the poems in the Egerton Manuscript—the satires are gathered into a discrete group placed after the lyric poetry (whereas in the manuscript they are interspersed with these poems).

<sup>22</sup> Simonds, *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, p. 124.

<sup>23</sup> A. K. Foxwell (ed.), *The Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, 2 vols. (London, 1913), 2. xiv, xx. Compare W. J. Courthorpe in 1897 on 'the vehement individuality and character of W's poetry' and E. M. W. Tillyard in 1929, describing Wyatt as 'a man of remarkable character, part of which has been made accessible to us through the medium of a number of short poems'. Courthorpe, *History of English Poetry*, cited by Patricia Thomson (ed.), *Wyatt: the Critical Heritage* (London, 1974), p. 13; Tillyard (ed.), *The Poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt: a Selection and a Study* (London, 1929), p. v.

<sup>24</sup> David Rosen, 'Time, identity, and context in Wyatt's verse', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 21 (1981), 5–20 (at 5).

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980), p. 159. Alistair Fox's much-cited chapter on 'The unquiet mind of Sir Thomas Wyatt' acknowledges the gap between Wyatt and the 'selves' asserted in his poetry ('in an attempt to bolster his shattered ego'); however, his readings of the poems are still predominantly biographical/psychological: the fragmented selves projected in Wyatt's poetry are seen as a response to the 'metaphysical panic' 'unleashed' by 'Anne Boleyn's defection'. Like most biographical readers, Fox focuses in particular on Wyatt's relationships with Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell, and on

So why is it that Wyatt's poetry lures us into these biographical readings, identifying poetic speakers with the poet himself, even in a critical climate—post-Barthes—where first-year undergraduates are gently dissuaded from doing likewise? The answer lies, in part, in the stylistic and structural features of Wyatt's poetry. First and foremost of these stylistic tics must be the way in which the poems are punctuated by the appearance of the first person singular; 'There is no more insistent expression of the "I" in Tudor literature', Greenblatt notes.<sup>26</sup> The amount to which Wyatt's poems are preoccupied with the self can be illustrated by measuring his adaptations of Petrarch against the Italian originals. Repeatedly, Wyatt's translations transform an address to a third person into a poem about the self. Petrarch's *Rima* 103, for example, advises Stefano Colonna the Younger to take heed from Hannibal's inability to press his advantage. 'Hannibal was victorious, but he did not know later how to make good use of his victorious fortune', Petrarch states: 'therefore, dear my Lord, take care that the same does not happen to you' ('Vinse Annibàl, et non seppe usar poi | ben la vittoriosa sua ventura; | però, Signor mio caro, aggiate cura | Che similmente non avegna a voi', ll. 1–4).<sup>27</sup> This is remoulded by Wyatt into a lament for his own protracted embassy in Spain in the late 1530s (one of the few Wyatt poems which does seem to suggest a precise location and therefore potential date). 'At Mountzon thus I restles rest in spayne', it complains (l. 8), identifying with Hannibal's failure, rather than instructing someone else to learn from it.<sup>28</sup> So too in Wyatt's translation of *Rima* 98, the external addressee—Orso dell'Anguillara—is replaced by the speaker's self. Where Petrarch's Orso cannot be reined in (unlike his horse),<sup>29</sup> Wyatt's speaker aligns himself with that horse, announcing that 'I my self be bridilled of my mynde'—a characteristic reworking of the Petrarchan source not only because

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his experiences in prison in 1536 and 1541. Fox, *Politics and Literature in the Reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 257–85; quotations from pp. 265, 264.

<sup>26</sup> Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 155.

<sup>27</sup> Robert M. Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems* (Cambridge, MA, 1976), pp. 206, 207. As discussed below, Wyatt was almost certainly using Vellutello's edition of Petrarch's poems, which reorders the poems; however, for ease of reference for twenty-first-century readers, Petrarch's *rime* will be cited by the now standard numbering (as used by Durling) and all subsequent quotations of Petrarch will be from Durling's parallel text edition.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Wyatt, 'Off cartage he', BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 54<sup>v</sup>. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent quotations of Wyatt's poetry will be from the Egerton Manuscript. In transcriptions, *i/j* and *u/v* have been retained, superscript letters have been lowered and contractions silently expanded.

<sup>29</sup> Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 200, 201.

Wyatt intensifies the presence of the first person, but because he also renders that (male) speaker curiously passive.<sup>30</sup> An examination of subjective emotions is thus substituted for Petrarch's more objective address to a third person. The tone—like much of Wyatt's oeuvre—consequently appears confessional. This feeling is heightened by the seemingly conversational nature of his poetry. Critics such as E. M. W. Tillyard have drawn attention to the 'touch of drama' in his lyrics, which are likened to Donne's poetry over half a century later.<sup>31</sup> This same sense of performance is conveyed by F. M. Padelford:

The poems are like monologues snatched from intense situations, like chance sparks from an anvil all aglow. There is no stopping for introduction or setting, and it is as if we were to enter the theatre at a moment when a situation is critical, and passionate utterance is at its height. The molten words, as if too long repressed, overflow from highly-wrought emotion. The language is direct, familiar, and unadorned; a case left to stand or fall by the bare truth of it.<sup>32</sup>

As Tillyard's or Padelford's words indicate, Wyatt's poems have a strong sense of a poetic speaker, who is either talking to a third party, or working through his own experience in language which is deliberately—often awkwardly—colloquial. This awkwardness is found, for example, in Wyatt's metrical roughness, which the compiler of *Songes and sonettes* felt moved to correct in 1557, amending Wyatt's lines to by-then more conventional pentameters. This discordance is also found in the way Wyatt allows words to rub up against each other, rather than striving to achieve a more eloquent, copious style: 'Ther was never File so half well filed | to file a file for every smythes intent', he writes; or 'And I my self my self alwayes to hate.'<sup>33</sup> Nott, for one, failed to appreciate this stylistic quirk, objecting to it in his note on 'Love and fortune and my mynde'. 'This is one of Wyatt's worst sonnets', he complains: 'How very inelegant is the second line, in which the word "*that*" occurs four times.'<sup>34</sup> Since we can see Wyatt consciously avoiding monotonous vocabulary in many of his revisions to the Egerton Manuscript, this repetition would appear to be choice, rather than accident or the limitations of Tudor English, the

<sup>30</sup> Wyatt, 'Though I my self be bridilled of my mynde', BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 21<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> Tillyard (ed.), *Poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, pp. 34–6.

<sup>32</sup> Frederick Morgan Padelford (ed.), *Early Sixteenth Century Lyrics* (Boston, 1907), pp. xlv–xlvi. For a similar conjunction of an appreciation of the affective power of Wyatt's poetry with attention to its dramatic quality, see Fox, *Politics and Literature*, p. 264.

<sup>33</sup> Wyatt, 'Ther was never File', ll. 1–2, BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 14<sup>v</sup>; Wyatt, 'The pillar pearisht is', l. 13, Muir and Thomson (eds.), *Collected Poems*, p. 238.

<sup>34</sup> Nott (ed.), *Works*, 2. 542.



'lack of diuersyte' of which Wyatt lamented in the dedicatory epistle to *The Quayete of mynde*.<sup>35</sup> That is, as we can see from these examples, Wyatt's poetry eschews an obviously polished or ornate style, potentially placing it closer to the registers of everyday speech.

Wyatt's poems further achieve a conversational style through their interruption with sighs, exclamations, direct questions, proverbs, and oaths (as in the rondeau 'What no perdy'). Wyatt's 'Farewell Love' is a useful example of his technique.<sup>36</sup> The sonnet opens with a direct address, 'Farewell Love' (l. 1), the orality of which is reasserted at the beginning of the third quatrain: 'Therefor farewell goo trouble yonger hertes' (l. 9). Avoiding ornament and employing stock descriptions ('bayted hookes', 'blynde errour', 'sherpe repulce', 'idill yeuth', 'brittil dertes', ll. 2, 5, 6, 11, 12), the language rarely strays from conventional, early sixteenth-century idiom, culminating in the biting note of the concluding proverb: 'me lusteth no lenger rotten boughes to clyme' (l. 14). The emphatic nature of this maxim is further strengthened by its appearance in a final couplet (the development of which was to prove one of Wyatt's most influential innovations in his Englishing of the sonnet form).

'Farewell Love' is also characteristic of Wyatt's poetry in its seeming dramatisation of a moment or event. Thomas M. Greene has observed Wyatt's tendency to 'linearise' his translations, 'transforming a circular plot to a unique, unrepeatable plot'.<sup>37</sup> As Greene points out, Wyatt makes small changes, removing 'talor' (sometimes), altering the plural 'estremi' to a singular 'extremite'.<sup>38</sup> The cumulative effect is that Wyatt's verse is made to articulate a single event (rather than the perpetual state which is found in Petrarch's *rime*). Coupled with the ordinariness of Wyatt's diction, this process of linearisation helps increase the sense that his poetry is confessional, describing an actual occurrence. This impression is enhanced by the fact that Wyatt tends to avoid allegory, which had been a dominant mode of medieval poetry. Greg Walker, for example, notes how 'the difference between Wyatt's anxieties and the allegorical trepidations of the figures in a previous generation's anti-curial satires, such as Drede in Skelton's *Bowge of Courte*, lies precisely in the sense that these words were written to explore a felt condition rather than to exemplify a

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Wyatt, *The Quayete of mynde* (London, Richard Pynson, [1528]), sig. a2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> BL Egerton MS 2711, fol. 13<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven, CT, 1982), p. 251.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

universal truth'.<sup>39</sup> With great economy, with a smattering of concrete nouns and simple adjectives, Wyatt can evoke a sense of real place, or occasion: such as the Kentish home in 'Myne owne John Poytz', where 'in fowle weder at [his] booke [he] sitt[s]' (l. 81).<sup>40</sup> The erotic encounter in 'They flee from me' is similarly captured through deceptively simple diction and syntax, such as the series of noun phrases and active verbs that are evenly distributed across the lines:

in *thyn aray*, after a *pleasant gyse*  
 when her *lose gowne* from her *shoulders* did **fall**  
 and she me **caught** in her *armes long and small*  
 therewithall swetely did me **kysse**  
 and softly **saide dere hert**, howe like you this?<sup>41</sup>

Atmosphere is further conveyed by the pair of sensory adverbs introduced as the situation intensifies ('swetely', 'softely', ll. 13, 14) and that snippet of direct speech: 'dere hert, howe like you this?' (l. 14). The choice of the proximal deixis *this* (rather than the distant *that*) further draws us in to the moment, whilst a retrospective irony is resonant in the fact that the blandishment 'dere heart' is the only non-concrete noun phrase in the description of the episode.

The betrayal that this poem records is also characteristically Wyatt, as is the barbed *politesse* of its closing line: 'I would fain knowe what she hath deserued' (l. 21), an ability to hide a sting in the tail that recurs across his writings, including in his letter to his son in April 1537, where he acknowledges—of his failed marriage to Elizabeth Brooke—that 'the faulte is both in your mother and me', before snatching this away with the coda 'but chieflie in her'.<sup>42</sup> A sense of a consistent outlook, or a coherent body of experience, is thus created by the repetitive nature of the scenarios depicted in Wyatt's poems and by the recurrence of a similar voice or register across his writing—a tone that is described as 'subdued sarcasm' by Greene, 'blame-style' by Reed Way Dasenbrock, in contrast to Petrarch's *stile de la loda*, or praise-style.<sup>43</sup> Repeatedly, we find Wyatt's

<sup>39</sup> Greg Walker, *Writing under Tyranny* (Oxford, 2005), p. 428.

<sup>40</sup> BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 49<sup>v</sup>. For a brief discussion of the 'solid[ity]' of Wyatt's nouns in 'Myne owne John Poytz', see Colin Burrow, 'Wyatt and Sixteenth-Century Horatianism', in Charles Martindale and David Hopkins (eds.), *Horace Made New* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 27–49 (at p. 37).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 27<sup>v</sup> (italics added).

<sup>42</sup> Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> Greene, *Light in Troy*, p. 251; Reed Way Dasenbrock, 'Wyatt's transformation of Petrarch', *Comparative Literature*, 40:2 (1988), 122–33 (at 129).

speakers locked in despair or self-loathing, a state which he often adds or embellishes in his translations. So, for instance, in his version of *Rima* 189, he switches Petrarch's 'i'ncomincio a desperar del porto' ('I begin to despair of the port') to 'I *remain* despering of the port'.<sup>44</sup> This sense of emotional paralysis is typical of the endings of many of Wyatt's poems, including his translation of *Rima* 269, rendered as 'The piller pearisht is whearto I Lent'.<sup>45</sup> Wyatt excises Petrarch's shift into philosophical generalisation ('Oh our life that is so beautiful to see, how easily it loses in one morning what has been acquired with great difficulty over many years!'; 'O nostra vita ch'è sì bella in vista, | com' perde aggelvolmente in un matino | quel che 'n molti anni a gran pena s'acquista', ll. 12–14).<sup>46</sup> Wyatt's sonnet instead concludes, still focused on the self, predicting a life of self-hatred, a stalemate hammered home by the masculine rhyme of the final couplet: 'And I my self my self alwayes to hate | Till dreadful death do ease my dolefull state' (ll. 13–14). The reiterative nature of the situations found in Wyatt's verses thus helps create the sense that there is a unified body of experience behind, and expressed through, these poems. Wyatt's speakers are constantly striving for stasis, bruised by change, disappointed by transience.<sup>47</sup> The proverbial wisdom cited often refers to the futility of seeking to hold the wind in a net, or capture water in a sieve.<sup>48</sup> Alterations and additions to Petrarch's lines highlight a sense of perpetual and unwanted change or motion: 'vita' ('life', l. 47) is expanded to become 'vnesy life' (l. 37);<sup>49</sup> a contrast between 'pace' and 'guerra' ('peace' and 'war', l. 30) is tellingly redescribed by Wyatt as the difference between 'rest' and 'error' (l. 28), error holding within it a sense of wandering,

<sup>44</sup> Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 334, 335; Wyatt, 'My galy charged with forgetfulnes', BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 21<sup>v</sup> (italics added).

<sup>45</sup> Wyatt, 'The piller pearisht is whearto I Lent', in Muir and Thomson (eds.), *Collected Poems*, p. 238.

<sup>46</sup> Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 442, 443.

<sup>47</sup> Other recurrent preoccupations include 'doubleness' (the word appears in three of the first six poems in the Egerton Manuscript) and waste, especially the 'wast' of words (see, for example, 'What nedeth these thretning wordes and wasted wynde?'). For a discussion of the impact of instability on Wyatt's poetic voice, see John Kerrigan, 'Wyatt's selfish style', *Essays and Studies*, 34 (1981), 1–18. This essay also draws attention to Wyatt's poetry as 'secretive' (p. 8), a quality discussed below.

<sup>48</sup> Wyatt, 'Whoso list to hounte', l. 8; 'A spending hand', l. 91.

<sup>49</sup> Petrarch, *Rima* 37, Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 98, 99; Wyatt, 'So feble is the threde', BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 67<sup>v</sup>; 'thvnesy' is spelt 'thvnsey', but I have amended the spelling, to aid the sense, in line with versions of the poem elsewhere (in *Songes and sonettes*, sig. 14<sup>v</sup>, as well as the Devonshire and Arundel Manuscripts).

derived as it is from the Latin *errare*.<sup>50</sup> Motion, in other words, offers Wyatt a ready metaphor for dissatisfaction, as demonstrated by two lines (again translated from Petrarch) in Wyatt's own hand in the Egerton Manuscript: 'From thought to thought from hill to hill love doth me lede, | Clene contrary from restfull lyff these common pathes I trede', the couplet reads, the regularity of the metre and the predominant monosyllables in the first line in particular capturing the enforced tedium of this unlooked-for journey.<sup>51</sup> In this uncertain, shifting world, the word *stay* holds dual promise, able to mean both 'stop' and 'support'.<sup>52</sup>

The desire for fixity, and the sense of bewilderment or frustration in the face of transitoriness, extends to the portrayal of human relationships. Little attention has been paid to Wyatt's habit of translating *speranza* (and its related terms) not as *hope*, but *trust* (the exception being Elizabeth Heale, in her discussion of Wyatt's poem 'Love and fortune and my mynde').<sup>53</sup> This small change entirely alters the dynamic depicted, and is not a mistranslation on Wyatt's part: he translates *spero* as 'I hope' in his translation of Petrarch's *Rima* 134 (l. 2).<sup>54</sup> The choice of 'trust' over 'hope' both imposes expectations—about standards of behaviour required from the addressee—and sets up the speaker for inevitable disappointment when that involuntary contract is broken. As Wyatt himself wrote, in his *Defence*, designed to exonerate himself from the charge of treason in 1541, 'yt is a smale thyng in alteringe of one syllable ether with penne or worde that may mayk in the conceavinge of truthe myche matter or error. For in thys thyng "I fere", or "I truste", semethe but one smale syllable chaynged, and yet it makethe a great dyfferaunce.'<sup>55</sup>

When read together as a body of poetry, then, the consistency of attitude, tone, and scenario help create the impression that the experiences and emotions voiced are those of the poet himself, especially when combined with the plain, colloquial style, the focus on inwardness, and the

<sup>50</sup> Petrarch, *Rima* 360, Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 560, 561; Wyatt, 'Myne olde dere enemy', BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 8<sup>r</sup>. The first three stanzas are missing from the Egerton MS, and have here been derived from *Songes and sonettes*, sig. F3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 65<sup>r</sup>; Petrarch, *Rima* 129, Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 264, 265.

<sup>52</sup> 'Stay, v<sup>1</sup>', sense 1, and 'stay, v<sup>2</sup>', sense 1; 'stay, n<sup>2</sup>', sense 1a, and 'stay, n<sup>3</sup>', sense 1, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://dictionary.oed.com>> [accessed 20 Dec. 2007]. See Wyatt, 'If waker care', l. 13, 'my hert alone wel worthie she doth stayer', BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 66<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Heale, *Wyatt, Surrey and Early Tudor Poetry* (London, 1998), p. 99.

<sup>54</sup> Wyatt, 'I fynde no peace', BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 20<sup>v</sup>; Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 272, 273.

<sup>55</sup> Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 197.

evocation of time, place and—occasionally—actual people (poems are addressed to the courtiers John Poyntz and Sir Francis Bryan, for example).<sup>56</sup> Here the way in which we tend to receive Wyatt is significant: Wyatt's poetic voice—the features of which I have been mapping—is one created out of the experience of sitting down to read a substantial body of his work, presented *en masse*, be it in modern or Victorian editions; imprints of *Songes and sonettes* from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries; or the Egerton Manuscript, where—unusually for a miscellany—the work of one poet dominates (albeit versifying which was ignored and overwritten by generations of the Harrington family into whose possession it came).

The potentially cohesive nature of Wyatt's idiom can be illustrated by examining 'So feble is the thred', one of Wyatt's more critically neglected poems. A translation of Petrarch's *Rima* 37, it is also a piece which unleashes C. S. Lewis's scorn. Particularly regrettable in Lewis's view is Wyatt's choice of metre, 'the terrible poulter's measure'. 'The thudding verbiage [. . .]', Lewis complains, 'raises a wonder why the man who thought Petrarch could be translated so, also thought Petrarch worth translating.'<sup>57</sup> Both Lewis's term *verbiage* and Patricia Thomson's phrase 'lumbering poulter's measure' hint at the reasons underlying their dissatisfaction with Wyatt's selected metre: written in alternating lines of twelve and fourteen syllables, poulter's measure is somewhat wordier than we tend to expect from our poetry, accustomed as we are to pentameters, which came to dominate English verse.<sup>58</sup> Yet—as well as allowing an investigation of Wyatt's accustomed style and techniques—proper reconsideration of the poem also shows Wyatt to be a much more accomplished poet than Lewis suggests.

'So feble is the thred' is rare within Wyatt's oeuvre because it is one of the few poems which we can situate chronologically. Written in Wyatt's hand and entitled at a later date 'In Spayne' (possibly by his son),<sup>59</sup> the poem originates from his protracted embassy between April 1537 and April 1540. The circumstantial dating is collaborated by Jason Powell's

<sup>56</sup> 'Myne owne Iohn Poyntz' and 'My mothers maydes' are addressed to Poyntz (who is named in ll. 70, 103); 'Syghes ar my food' and 'A spending hand' are addressed to Bryan (who is named in l. 7 and l. 9 respectively).

<sup>57</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), p. 225.

<sup>58</sup> Patricia Thomson, *Sir Thomas Wyatt and his Background* (London, 1964), p. 187.

<sup>59</sup> I owe this suggestion to Jason Powell (private correspondence, Oct. 2007), who sees the title as evidence of Wyatt's family attempting to place and categorise his poetry after his death.

work on the ink in the Egerton Manuscript, whereby the uneven fading would indicate the use of dry ink, ideal for use when travelling.<sup>60</sup> In this instance, there would thus seem to be a plausible autobiographical motive on Wyatt's part for translating Petrarch's canzone: *Rima 37* laments separation from Laura, and at this time Wyatt had left behind his own long-term mistress, Elizabeth Darrell. The long lines of poulter's measure, far from being 'lumbering' (Thomson's phrase), are entirely suited to a poem which marks the long days of enervating absence, the duration of which becomes all the more unbearable for being set against the brevity of human existence:

the lyff so short so fraile that mortal men lyve here  
 so gret a whaite so hevy charge the body that we bere  
 that when I thinke apon the distance and the space  
 that doth so ferr devid me from my dere desired face  
 I know not how tattayne the wynges that I require  
 to lyfft my whaite that it myght fle to folow my desyre [.] (ll. 21–6)

These lines are far from being metrically inept. The predominant monosyllables capture the sheer heaviness of the physical body, while the marked caesuras in those first two lines imitate the faltering flight of a bird failing to rise from the ground. The halting rhythm is then in tension with the yearning for contact, resonant in the frequent attempts at enjambment (three out of these six lines—ll. 22, 23, 25—run on in a grammatical sense). The transformation of Petrarch's canzone into an English form (poulter's measure) is enhanced by Wyatt's subtle—but characteristic—use of alliteration, which provides an alternative to the patterning of sound achieved in the Italian with its greater number of similar rhymes (Italian words having a much smaller pool of endings than English).

The poem is also unusual for Wyatt in that it celebrates love. The experience might be painful, but for once it is not the woman's fault. Yet even as the poem traces a different trajectory, it does so in terms that can be found elsewhere in the Wyatt canon. Recurrently, for example, love is seen to require the self-abnegation common to much Tudor love poetry, as in Wyatt's line elsewhere: 'I love an other and thus I hate myself.'<sup>61</sup> What in Petrarch's poem are contradictory but simultaneously held emotions—'in odio me stesso, et amo altrui' ('I hate myself and love another') are

<sup>60</sup> Jason Powell, 'Thomas Wyatt's poetry in Embassy: Egerton 2711 and the production of literary manuscripts abroad', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 67:2 (2004), 261–82.

<sup>61</sup> Wyatt, 'I fynde no peace', l. 11, BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 20<sup>v</sup>.

here transformed into one being the consequence of the other ('and thus').<sup>62</sup> In 'So feble is the thred', however, this self-abandonment is portrayed as welcome, even necessary, if we consider the metaphor of the ship, which needs someone at the helm if disaster is to be averted: 'those handes those armes that do embrace | me from my sellff and rule the sterne of my poor lyff' (ll. 82–3). The speaker here places himself, gladly, under the woman's guiding hand.

As we saw earlier, enforced motion—and the search for stasis—are familiar motifs of Wyatt's poetry. Wyatt's Kent, for example, celebrated in 'Myne owne Iohn Poyntz', offers the speaker more than simply freedom from courtly corruption; Wyatt's speaker is 'at home' (l. 80), unlike Luigi Alamanni, who wrote the Italian original whilst exiled in Provence.<sup>63</sup> Within 'So feble is the thred', it is the woman—'my swete wele' (l. 6)—who becomes emblematic of home, situated in 'that plesant place | where she doth lyve by whome I lyve' (ll. 95–6). The repetition of 'lyve' here acts as a tribute to the woman's sustaining powers, a lovely equilibrium established in the simple symmetry of that phrase. Where Laura, honoured by Heaven, is someone 'in whom virtue and courtesy dwell' ('alberga onestate et cortesia', l. 111), Wyatt's poem depicts the woman's virtue as active, not simply lodging, but flourishing in her, capable as a consequence of inspiring or infusing the man whose love she nurtures: she is 'the restyng place of love where vertu lyves and grose' (l. 93).

Besides its unusually positive treatment of the woman, 'So feble is the thred' also stands out because it forms a sequence in the Egerton Manuscript which can potentially be read as a narrative. The poem is preceded by a sonnet, 'If waker care', revised in Wyatt's hand in the darker ink which is characteristic of ordinary ink, rather than the dry ink used when travelling.<sup>64</sup> It is followed by 'Tagus fare well', an obvious allusion to Wyatt's longed-for departure from the Iberian peninsula, penned in Wyatt's own hand and also headed 'In Spayne'.<sup>65</sup> This physical evidence, suggesting a triptych of poems ranging from before the embassy ('If waker care') to the end of that period abroad ('Tagus fare well'), is supported by internal echoes of sentiment and idiom. 'So feble is the thred' depicts the woman as a healing refuge, whose 'pleasant word & chere' did

<sup>62</sup> Petrarch, *Rima* 134, l. 11, Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 272, 273.

<sup>63</sup> 'Sono in Prouenza', Luigi Alamanni, *Satire* 10, l. 97, reproduced in Muir and Thomson (eds.), *Collected Poems*, pp. 337–9.

<sup>64</sup> BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 66<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 69<sup>r</sup>.

‘bryng [. . .] redresse off lingred payne’ (ll. 74–5). This builds on the preceding poem, which cherishes ‘thunfayned chere of phillis’ (l. 9). In both poems, love necessitates self-abandonment. However—as we saw earlier—this is not abhorred, but relished: Phillis ‘from my self now hath me in her grace | she hath in hand my witt my will and all’. [A]nd all’—the sigh at the end of the line in which the lover surrenders himself, bodily, to his beloved—hints at a bawdy reading. ‘Will’ can assume its meaning of ‘desire’, and the ‘grace’ the lover receives—courtesy of a hand-job—would thus be the sexual grace for which Sidney’s *Astrophil* would sue, some fifty years later.<sup>66</sup>

This sexualised reading is entirely consistent with Wyatt’s tendency to make Petrarch’s Laura a much more tangible figure. Over and over in his translations, Wyatt removes Petrarch’s heavenly register: ‘anima’ and ‘alma’ are habitually translated as ‘heart’ or ‘mind’, not ‘soul’.<sup>67</sup> As Sergio Baldi observes, both Wyatt and Petrarch’s speakers ‘describe their lady as “cruel”, but by this word they mean different things: for Petrarch’s lady is hard and immovable only because of her virtue, and in the cause of virtue, while Wyatt’s is merely fickle, unfeeling, or ungrateful’.<sup>68</sup> More particularly, though, this sensuality has an immediate resonance with Wyatt’s eroticisation of *Rima* 37. Petrarch’s canzone merely imagines looking at Laura’s ‘noble arms and gestures sweetly haughty’ (le braccia gentili | et gli atti suoi soavemente alteri’, ll. 100–1); the very adjective chosen—haughty (*alteri*)—reminds us that he is allowed to look, not touch. Wyatt’s poem in contrast evokes a sense of contact, in ‘those handes those armes that do embrace’ (l. 82); the asyndeton, omitting the construction *and*, emphasises that tactility, as if recording the sensation of now hands, now arms. Continuing this erotic vein, the poem ends with the speaker imagining the paper on which the poem is written nestling between the woman’s breasts, an image absent from the Italian original: ‘By twene her brestes she shall the put there shal she the reserve’ (l. 98), a physical favour

<sup>66</sup> ‘Will, n<sup>1</sup>’, sense I.1.a, *OED* [accessed 21 Dec. 2007]; Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, in *Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1994).

<sup>67</sup> See Wyatt, ‘Such vayn thought’ (a translation of Petrarch, *Rima* 169), l. 6; ‘The pillar pearisht is’ (a translation of Petrarch, *Rima* 269), l. 10; ‘So feble is the thred’ (a translation of Petrarch, *Rima* 37), l. 7; cf. ‘The lyvely sparks’ (a translation of Petrarch, *Rima* 258, where *alma*, l. 9, is omitted entirely).

<sup>68</sup> Baldi, *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, pp. 31–2. The much more earthbound nature of Wyatt’s women possibly explains why he was drawn to translate poems from the ‘In Vita’ section of Petrarch’s *Rime*, rather than those from ‘In Morte’, where the dead Laura becomes yet more heavenly and untouchable; Wyatt only translates two poems from ‘In Morte’: ‘The pillar pearisht is’ and ‘Whoso list to hounte’.



which—like the lover's situation in 'If waker care' (l. 11)—is tellingly described as 'grace' (l. 96). Wyatt's trio of verses—moving in the Egerton Manuscript from requited love and sexual fulfilment to enforced separation—is completed by 'Tagus fare well', which shares the sensuality of the preceding poems, as London 'like bendyd mone doth lend her lusty syd' (l. 6). Further to that, it carries over a pivotal image from 'So feble is the thred'. The final line of 'Tagus fare well', at long last, anticipates the 'winges' (l. 8)—painfully lacking in the previous poem—which will bear him homeward.

The rarity of 'So feble is the thred'—but also its rootedness within Wyatt's oeuvre—is further exemplified by the role played by the puns within it. Wyatt's poetry frequently plays on words. Habitually, this serves to highlight the sliding meaning or deceptiveness of language. So, for example, the 'love' inspired by 'her lokes lovely' in 'For to love her' proves unfounded (l. 1), and the lady less than lovable, despite her beauty; 'trusting by trought to have had redresse' thus transpires to be a foolish delusion and a misplaced trust (l. 3).<sup>69</sup> Similarly, 'They flee from me' depends for much of its power on its interrogation of what Greene has called 'wobbly words', not least among them the terms 'kindly' and 'gentill'.<sup>70</sup> However, 'So feble is the thred' does not deploy word-play to expose the instability of language; rather, how meanings concur. Amending the original translation from 'viage' to 'Iornei' (l. 20), Wyatt's description of the sun's course from East to West puns inter-lingually on the French *journée* (day); the 'whaite' (l. 22) which causes the body to fail is both the extended *durée* of the lovers' separation and the weight of the lover's body, too heavy to 'fle to folow [his] desyre' (l. 26); the ambiguous spelling of 'faytfull hert' (l. 36) contains a sense of both fateful and faithful; and the 'wofull cace' he moans (l. 81) is both the 'cace or skyn' of l. 64 and the pitiful condition of the speaker.<sup>71</sup>

'So feble is the thred' and its companion pieces are thus both unusual within the Wyatt canon and emblematic of it: emblematic because they display Wyatt's characteristic voice and techniques; unusual because they invert them—because they seem to be specific; because they hang together as a narrative; because they (tentatively) air the possibility of a love that is both reciprocated and curative; because they celebrate puns, rather than revile them; and finally because they seem on the verge of

<sup>69</sup> BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 14<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> Greene, *Light in Troy*, p. 257.

<sup>71</sup> 'Case, n<sup>1</sup>', sense 5a, *OED* [accessed 21 Dec. 2007].

achieving that longed-for repose, although that yearning—as yet-unfulfilled—is in itself also typically Wyatt. As the case of the ‘In Spayne’ section of the Egerton Manuscript would seem to show, in other words, Wyatt’s poetry does present us with an alluring sense of a cohesive, or at least recurrent, persona. Certainly this is the case in the form in which we tend to read him, one poem after another. Yet I also want to suggest that his poems—whilst hinting at biographical readings—also prove resistant to them, eluding readers who try to pin them down to historical event, place, person. This is particularly so because—despite their seemingly confessional tone—the poems recurrently withhold specific references. Take Wyatt’s translation of Petrarch’s *Rima* 269. Petrarch’s opening line remembers both his patron (Cardinal Giovanni Colonna) and Laura, both of whom had died in the plague which swept across Italy in 1348–9. Wyatt’s opening line—‘The pillar pearisht is whearto I Lent’—has no equivalent to the commemorative function of Petrarch’s ‘Rotta è l’alta colonna e ‘l verde lauro’ (‘Broken are the high Column and the green Laurel’), recording as it does both Colonna’s and Laura’s names. Wyatt’s poem, however, is invariably read by critics and editors as a lament for his dead patron, Thomas Cromwell, who was executed in 1540. But such interpretations, whilst possible, can only remain speculative, based on two bits of purely circumstantial evidence: first, that the poem Wyatt translates was in part about death of a patron; secondly, that Wyatt is said to have wept at the foot of Cromwell’s scaffold, a scene famously described in the Spanish *Chronicle of Henry VIII*:

And amongst all those gentlemen, Cromwell saw Master Wyatt [. . .] and called to him, saying, ‘Oh, noble Wyatt, God be with thee, and I pray thee, pray to God for me!’ (He had always had a great love for this Master Wyatt.) And Wyatt could not answer, so many were the tears that he shed. All those gentlemen marvelled to see how deeply Master Wyatt was moved. And as Cromwell was a very wise man, he reflected on it, and said out loud, ‘Oh, Wyatt, do not weep, for if I were no more guilty than you were when you were arrested, I should not have come to this!’<sup>72</sup>

The habitual opacity of Wyatt’s Petrarchan translations—about whom they are referring to, when they were written—is all the more noteworthy when we consider the form in which Wyatt was reading Petrarch: namely, Alessandro Vellutello’s *Il Petrarca*, first printed in 1525 with extensive commentary. Patricia Thomson seems to have been the first to note Wyatt’s use of Vellutello in an article printed in 1959, which high-

<sup>72</sup> Cited in Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 173.

lights Wyatt's debt to Vellutello's exposition on *Rima* 190, 'Una candida cerva' (which Wyatt translated as 'Whoso list to hounte'), although Wyatt's borrowings go much further and deeper than this.<sup>73</sup> The neglect of Thomson's discovery is exemplified by the amount of critical ink that has since been spilt, pondering what led Wyatt to transform Petrarch's 'Nessun me tocchi' (l. 9) into the Latin of the Vulgate: 'Noli me tangere' (Christ's words to Mary Magdalene at his resurrection). The immediate answer is that those are the words used in the commentary. This does not take away from the fact that Wyatt's decision to follow Vellutello's Latin, rather than Petrarch's vernacular, leads to an intriguing juxtaposition of two biblical allusions—the second being Christ's words to the Pharisees: 'give therefore to Caesar, that which is Caesar's'.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, it is true that we as critics need to attend to the version in which Wyatt was reading Petrarch, not least because Vellutello's edition marked a decided shift in the reception of the Italian poet. Vellutello reordered the poems, so that they fitted known events in the author's life, a sequence he then bolstered with the prefatory 'Life of Petrarch' and an accompanying commentary, which knitted the poems tightly together, frequently stressing how one leads on from that preceding it. Vellutello presents himself as a historical detective, poring over Petrarch's letters and writings, visiting Petrarch's old haunts in Avignon and the Vaucluse, even interviewing descendants of his known associates.<sup>75</sup> Great care is spent establishing the historical 'truth' about Laura, in a prefatory 'Life' which follows that of Petrarch. Vellutello's supporting material also includes a map of the Vaucluse, which focuses 'in exaggerated detail upon the region where the Sorgue river passes through Cabrières', where Petrarch was supposed to have met Laura.<sup>76</sup> Petrarch's *rime* are thus presented as a record of the poet's life. As William Kennedy notes, the extensive prefatory material and dense commentary surrounding each poem 'draw attention to biographical relationships between the poet and his poetry' and 'imply a closer connection between the voice of the speaker and that of the historical writer than earlier readers were likely to assume'.<sup>77</sup>

Vellutello's *Petrarcha* went through twenty-seven editions in the sixty years between 1525 and 1584, making it by far the 'most popular and

<sup>73</sup> Patricia Thomson, 'Wyatt and the Petrarchan commentators', *Review of English Studies*, NS, 10:39 (1959), 225–33.

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 20. 20–1, in Tyndale's translation.

<sup>75</sup> See William Kennedy, *Authorizing Petrarch* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), pp. 47–51.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

influential' of the sixteenth-century commentaries.<sup>78</sup> Not only was it the work which Wyatt was probably using, therefore; it was also the means by which his Tudor readers were likely to receive their Petrarch, a Petrarch whose poetry was being read as a narrative of his own life. Wyatt's poems play on this. Translating Petrarch, he is engaging with what had become a biographical tradition. Yet he also disrupts that narrative. He plucks individual sonnets out of Vellutello's carefully arranged and interwoven sequence, often further denuding them of external reference points (as we saw with his translation of Petrarch's *Rima* 269, 'Rotta è l'alta colonna e l' verde lauro'). This tendency to strip out specific referents extends beyond Wyatt's Italian translations. We can see him removing them in the Egerton Manuscript, for example, notoriously altering the line 'her that did set our country in a rore'—generally read as referring to Anne Boleyn—to '*Brunet* that set *my welth* in such a rore' (l. 8, italics added).<sup>79</sup> This caution—in removing potential allusions to affairs of state—is possibly also reflected in the cancelling of the word 'tyranny' in two places in the same manuscript (corrections made in Wyatt's hand). Wyatt substitutes 'crueltye' in the first line of 'Who hath herd of such crueltye before?', and 'what reson' in the poem 'Desire alas' (l. 5).<sup>80</sup> This second example in particular looks decidedly unguarded in its original form, which had read 'tyranne it is to reule thy subiectes | by forcyd law and mutabilitie' (ll. 5–6). By the mid-1530s, a number of acts extending royal powers, including the Act of Supremacy, had been steered through parliament to further the split from the Church of Rome. By this time, therefore, lines juxtaposing 'tyranne' and 'forcyd law' were probably best avoided, even in a poem ostensibly about love, particularly when coupled with a suggestion of 'mutabilitie', which might be interpreted by hostile readers as alluding to religious change.

Admittedly, the sense of exclusion created by our inability to know for sure whom or what is being hinted at in Wyatt's poetry is in part produced by the fact that these poems are coterie poems, written for circles of acquaintances, not primarily intended for a print audience. Yet that

<sup>78</sup> Thomson, 'Wyatt and the Petrarchan commentators', 227.

<sup>79</sup> Wyatt, 'If waker care', BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 66<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>80</sup> i.e. the line originally read 'Who hath herd of suche tyranny before', BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 29<sup>v</sup>; in 'Desire alas', the line is amended to read 'What reson is to rewle thy subiectes so', fol. 50<sup>r</sup>. Cf. Wyatt's translation of Serafino's strambotto 'Sio son caduto'; Wyatt initially follows Serafino's first person pronouns, translating l. 1 as 'I ame not ded although I had a fall'; this is corrected in the Egerton Manuscript in Wyatt's hand to '*He is not ded that somtyme hath a fall*', fol. 40<sup>r</sup> (italics added).

inscrutability runs deeper, permeating Wyatt's metaphorical language. Throughout Wyatt's poetry, there is a horror of exposure. Where Petrarch writes how his cares 'show' ('mostrò') more clearly than a colour through 'crystal or glass' ('cristallo o vetro'), Wyatt talks instead of crystal 'bewray[ing]' the colour beneath.<sup>81</sup> Wyatt's choice of verb is all the more striking because he altered it from 'declare' during revisions. Similarly, in 'The piller pearisht', Wyatt postpones Petrarch's allusion to the laurel until the second quatrain, where he transforms Petrarch's commemorative gesture to '1 verde lauro' into a nightmarish vision of uncasing. Note here a move characteristic of Wyatt's translations, where words spoken about another—in this case Laura—are transferred to the poetic self (the same technique we saw earlier, in relation to Orso's horse). As Wyatt writes in 'The piller pearisht', fortune—'happe' (l. 5)—has 'rent' away 'of all [his] ioye the vearye bark and rynde' (ll. 5–7). Petrarch's equivalent—the loss of his double treasure ('il mio doppio tesauo', l. 5)—has none of this sense of violent exposure, the stripping of a tree that ensures its utter destruction. The bare, unprotected tree is here the inverse of the refuge offered by 'the hertes forrest' in Wyatt's translation of *Rima* 140 (l. 9), where Wyatt freely embellishes on Petrarch's plain 'core', or heart, giving safety a sense of a physical location—'the hertes forrest'—that is absent from Petrarch's poem, or Surrey's alternative translation ('Coward Loue then to the hart apace | Taketh his flight', ll. 9–10).<sup>82</sup> Habitually, then, Wyatt's speakers endeavour to maintain a layer of protective opacity, withholding necessary points of reference or evading committing to definite statements. 'If', 'yet', 'but' are favourite conjunctions. Tellingly, the description of the ideal woman in 'A face that shuld content me' is undercut by the recurrent use of conditional verbs: 'shuld' the face be 'cumley to behold' (l. 2); 'shuld' it be able to 'Speke withowt wordes' (looks presumably proving more reliable than verbal communication, ll. 4–5); 'shuld' the hair 'be of cryspyd goold' (l. 6), then 'these myght chance I myght be tyed' (l. 7).<sup>83</sup> Yet even as the speaker offers the tentative possibility of commitment, this is destabilised by the revelation in the last line

<sup>81</sup> Petrarch, *Rima* 37, ll. 57–8, Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 98, 99; Wyatt, 'So feble is the thred', l. 50.

<sup>82</sup> Wyatt, 'The longe love', BL MS Egerton 2711, fols. 5<sup>r-v</sup>; Petrarch, *Rima* 140, Durling (ed./trans.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, pp. 284, 285; Howard, 'Loue, that liueth, and reigneth in my thought', *Songes and sonettes*, sig. A4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>83</sup> Wyatt, 'A face that shuld content me', Muir and Thomson (eds.), *Collected Poems*, pp. 132–3 (italics added).

that the knot which 'shuld not slyde' needs to be 'knytt agayne' (l. 8); that is, it has slid before.

That Wyatt's poetic speakers should be evasive is perhaps unsurprising, considering that it is commonplace to say that their creator lived in a world of surveillance, both watched himself and required to watch others. As Cromwell instructed Wyatt in 1537, his role as ambassador to the emperor, Charles V, required him to 'fishe out the botom of his stomake'.<sup>84</sup> Yet it was not just foreigners that Henry's courtiers were expected to spy upon, but each other, a habit of espial that we glimpse through the lens of Thomas Elyot's *Pasquil the playne* (1533), where Harpocrates casually reveals towards the end of the text that he had been eavesdropping at a window as Pasquil and Gnatho converse; his covert observation is all the more sinister because Gnatho has already warned Pasquil that 'if [he] wolde be a reporter, it mought tourne the to no littell displeasure'.<sup>85</sup> As Muriel St Clare Byrne shows in her analysis of the Lisle Letters, 'every man in the King's service was a potential spy and informer, which was probably [. . .] why Marillac [the French ambassador] spoke so enviously of the English intelligence service'.<sup>86</sup> Wyatt himself was included in this web: while he was required to watch the Holy Roman Emperor, Bonner was sent to watch Wyatt, almost to Wyatt's undoing, since it was Bonner's accusatory letters to Cromwell which formed the basis for Wyatt's arrest for treason in 1541, when they were found among the former chancellor's papers.<sup>87</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Wyatt's response to the charge of treason was to compile his *Defence*. The document, a feat of rhetorical prowess, is described by Walker as 'so honest in its admissions'.<sup>88</sup> Walker also observes that 'it is tempting to conclude that here, at bay, we see the true Wyatt emerge'.<sup>89</sup> As I hope to show in the final section of this lecture, the document is indeed 'honest', and I think it does show 'the true Wyatt', but perhaps not quite in the sense that Walker's words suggest. This is not to take issue with Walker's central argument that Wyatt's *Defence* is remarkable for its bravery in mounting a critique of the 1534 Treason Act and daring to assert that a subject can disagree with his monarch's policy

<sup>84</sup> Cromwell to Wyatt, 10 Oct. 1537, Roger Bigelow Merriman (ed.), *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2000), 2. 92.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Elyot, *Pasquil the playne* (London, Thomas Berthelet, 1533), fols. 28<sup>v</sup>, 4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>86</sup> Muriel St Clare Byrne (ed.), *The Lisle Letters*, 6 vols. (Chicago, 1981), 6. 240.

<sup>87</sup> Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 175.

<sup>88</sup> Walker, *Writing Tyranny*, p. 349.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

without being disloyal or seditious; that you can 'myslyk[e] a law and still obey it.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, the *Defence* is not straightforwardly 'honest', in the way in which we would primarily understand 'honest' today (that is, as 'truthful').<sup>91</sup> Wyatt does not actually confess anything (wisely, no doubt). Like his poetic speakers, much hangs on hypothetical utterances. The key charge against Wyatt is that he made a treasonous remark over dinner in 1538. Wyatt's mission at this point was to ensure that Henry VIII was not excluded from any league between the Emperor and French king. By 1538, this looked set for certain failure, not least because Henry omitted to build on the amicable relationship Wyatt had established with Charles V. Bonner reports that during this period Wyatt had burst out, 'By goddes bludde, ye shall see the kinge our maister cast out at the carts [arse], and if he soo be serued, by godds body, he is well serued.'<sup>92</sup> Since pushing criminals out of the back of a cart was a usual way of hanging them in the period, Wyatt therefore stands accused of imagining the death of his monarch, in breach of the 1534 Treason Act. This central accusation is then bolstered by several other complaints, among them that Wyatt associated with courtesans; that Wyatt allowed and encouraged his servant, John Mason, to meet Cardinal Reginald Pole (deemed a traitor to Henry VIII); and that Wyatt repeatedly complained about both his previous imprisonment in the Tower in 1536 and his current position as the king's ambassador. 'Gods bludde! was not that a prety sending of me ambassadour to thempereour, first to put me in the Tower, and then furthewithe to send me hither?' Bonner recounts Wyatt exclaiming: 'By godds precieuse bludde, I had rather the king shuld set me in Newgate than soo doo' (p. 66).

Wyatt never denies any of the charges outright. His treatment of the 'carts arse' accusation exemplifies his method. At no point does he proffer a single version: 'this is what happened'; 'this is what I said'. Instead, he posits a series of hypotheses: first, why, *if* he had said these words, they would not necessarily have been spoken 'falcely, maliciouslye, and traitorouslye' (p. 196). Secondly, he asks that attention be paid to the exact wording attributed to him—be it 'fall', 'caste', or 'left owte'—and proposes that any variation between the witnesses' accounts, however small,

<sup>90</sup> Wyatt, *Defence*, in Muir, *Life and Letters*, pp. 187–209 (at p. 205).

<sup>91</sup> 'Honest, a', sense 3c, *OED* [accessed 21 Dec. 2007].

<sup>92</sup> Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 67. Muir here quotes a Victorian transcription, which coyly changes 'arse' to 'tail'. Bonner originally wrote 'arse'; the term has therefore been restored here. Thanks to Jason Powell for clarifying this point and thus explaining the discrepancy between Bonner's letter (as printed in *Life and Letters*) and the phrase in Wyatt's *Defence*.

points both to their unreliability and their malice (p. 197). His third line of argument is to stress the unlikelihood that he would have been so ‘veri a foole’ to have exposed himself as a traitor to Bonner and his companion Simon Haynes, ‘with whome [he] had no great acquayntaunce and myche les truste’ (p. 197). The fourth strategy is to suggest that his alleged words were merely ‘a commen proverbe’, and that this proverb (should he have spoken it), far from compassing the king’s death, instead regrets that—like a parcel ‘negligently’ ‘lefte owte of the cartes ars’—Henry VIII might be omitted from the imminent ‘union of moste parte of Christendome’ (p. 198). Fifth, Wyatt returns to close reading in order to try again to expose the unreliability of Bonner’s testimony, arguing that logically he would not have said what he apparently said at the time alleged because, knowing that Henry had already been excluded from the league: ‘is yt now lyke that after this I wolde vse the future tens in that was paste? and “shall”? “Ye shall see”? And then “yf he be so, by goddys bloude he is well servyd”; and then “I wolde he were”’ (p. 198). ‘Consyder the place and tyme where my accusares sayethe that I shulde speake yt and therby ye shall easly perseave that ther theie lye and mysreporte my tale, or els that I cane [not] speake Inglyshe’, Wyatt reasons. Since Wyatt is clearly more than proficient in his own tongue, by framing the matter as a choice between these two options (that they lie, or he cannot speak English), he manoeuvres the auditor/reader into agreeing with his claim that Bonner and his supporters bear false witness. Wyatt’s sixth tactic is also designed to suggest that Bonner has concocted the evidence, artfully appropriating Wyatt’s accustomed style to authenticate the accusation. As Wyatt explains,

[b]y cause I am wonte some tyme to rappe owte an owthe in an earnest tawlke, looke how craftylie theie have put in an othe [by goddes bludde] to [. . .] make the matter seme myne; and bycause theie have garded an nowghtitie garmente of thers with on of my nawghttie gardes theie wyll swere and face me downe that that was my garment. (p. 199)

A rough, plain style—marked by exclamations and oaths—is not necessarily sincere, in other words; it can be imitated, assumed like a cloak. Wyatt’s eighth and final method deployed to rebut the charge, insists simply upon his lack of treasonable intent: even ‘yf I had so saide, I mente not that nowghtie interpretation that no Devell wolde have imagined vpon me’, he states (p. 199), before proceeding to cite his own actions as evidence of his loyalty.



The means by which Wyatt seeks to assert his innocence on this matter are thus consistent only in their collective aim to discredit or disprove Bonner's testimony. This same evasiveness, this reluctance to commit to one definitive statement, is also found in Wyatt's attempt to refute the charge that he conspired with the Catholic Pole. Wyatt resorts to ridiculing the suggestion, falling back on the question of his religious allegiance. Yet even this confesses nothing. It substitutes for a statement of faith the opinions of others: 'I thynke I shulde have more adoe with a great sorte in Englande to purge my selffe of suspecte of a Lutherane then of a Papyst' (pp. 195–6). We do not learn what Wyatt *is*; rather what others *think* he is (which is *not* what he is accused of being). Negative definition of this type in fact reveals little, just as in 'Myne owne Iohn Poyntz' we do not hear what qualities and ambitions the speaker holds, but what he refutes: 'I cannot I no no it will not be' (l. 76).

The shifting argument of the *Defence* is a rhetorical *tour de force*. The truth of Wyatt's position—and the untruth of Bonner's—is demonstrated by the mutability of Wyatt's argument, adapting to meet the charges posed. Truth is not equated with, or achieved by, fixity of position, no more than it is in Wyatt's poem 'Vnstable dream', which dissociates the two qualities: 'be stedfast ons or els at least be true', the speaker pleads (l. 2).<sup>93</sup> The Wyatt displayed in the *Defence* is, thus, in many ways, as Walker suggests, the 'true' Wyatt, because it is here that we see him at work, deploying the 'oratory' and 'prudence' for which Thomas Warton would commend the poet in the 1770s.<sup>94</sup> Warton's choice of the term *prudence* here holds appropriate—if probably inadvertent—resonances with Machiavellian *prudenzia* (copies of whose works were already circulating at the English court during Wyatt's lifetime).<sup>95</sup>

The 'true' Wyatt, then, is a man of judicious circumspection, moulding his words to suit the circumstances at hand. As such, he is entirely concordant with early modern conceptions of honesty, which encompassed more than simply truth-telling. As Jennifer Richards's work on the translation of the Latin term *honestas* has shown, it includes having the

<sup>93</sup> BL MS Egerton 2711, fol. 54r.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry*, 4 vols. (London, J. Dodsley and others, 1781), 3, 28.

<sup>95</sup> Cromwell received copies of *Il Principe* and the history of Florence from Lord Morley in 1537, James Carley, 'Parker, Henry, tenth Baron Morley', *ODNB* [accessed 21 Dec. 2007]. For evidence that Henrician courtiers were reading Machiavelli from the mid-1530s, see also Sydney Anglo, *Machiavelli—The First Century: Studies in Enthusiasm, Hostility, and Irrelevance* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 97–102.

ability to restrain yourself, and to tailor what you say to the occasion and audience.<sup>96</sup> Certainly ‘honesty’ has little to do with the plain speech for which Wyatt was known in life—and which is characteristic of both his poetry and his speech; indeed, as we saw Wyatt suggest in his *Defence*, the plain style is no less available than the ornate for imitation and appropriation. Apparent openness or sincerity in Wyatt’s world was yet another tool for probing (or framing) others, used as bait for drawing out the unwary. As Cromwell instructed Wyatt in October 1537, ‘You must in your conference with themperour take occasion to speake of all those matiers, and soo frankly to speake of them as you may feale the depenes of his harte.’<sup>97</sup> The primary meaning of honesty in the period, however, was *honour*, as found in Bonner’s complaint that Wyatt—in suffering Henry’s embassy to ‘ride on such spittell jades’—regards ‘neyther the kings honour or his honestie or ours’.<sup>98</sup> In his letters to his son, Wyatt protests against this superficial sense of honesty: ‘I meane not that honestye that the comen sort callith an honist man.’<sup>99</sup> Rather, for Wyatt, real honesty goes beyond a ‘reputation for riches, for authoritie, or some like’. Instead, it displays exactly the sort of self-moderation detailed by Richards, as can be seen through his commendation of his father in the same letter. Wyatt holds up Sir Henry Wyatt as an example of an ‘honest’ man for his own son to emulate; the qualities he draws attention to are his reverence, his pity, his truth, his loyalty, his diligence, and his circumspection.<sup>100</sup> No man was ‘more circumspect’, we are told. Whilst qualities such as truth and loyalty fit easily with modern conceptions of honesty, its connection to prudence or circumspection is rather less familiar to us, and a convenient reminder that early modern perceptions of the term encompassed this variety of meaning. Wyatt’s ‘persinge eye’ (to return to Surrey’s elegy) might indeed be as watchful as it was honest: the two meanings do not necessarily conflict in this period. Like the Wyatt of Surrey’s elegy, the ‘true’ Wyatt is composed of, and able to reconcile, seeming opposites, a visage ‘sterne and mylde’: a Wyatt who can adapt—chameleon-like—to the varied roles for which he is celebrated in Leland’s *Naeniae*. For all their seeming interiority, Wyatt’s poems are similarly anchored in a public world. His poetic speakers are intensely conscious of

<sup>96</sup> Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge, 2003).

<sup>97</sup> Merriman (ed.), *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell*, 2. 92.

<sup>98</sup> Muir, *Life and Letters*, p. 68.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202; cf. Wyatt’s grouping of ‘honestie, wyt or discretion’ in his *Defence*, pointing to their use as synonyms (p. 139).

their audience, as they recurrently endeavour to justify, protect or reclaim their speakers' 'honesty' (that is, their honour), which has been damaged by the women who have deserted them.<sup>101</sup>

And here I want to state the wider implications of this study of Wyatt. Tudor poets played fast and loose with the apparent intimacy of lyric poetry, both evoking and disrupting the assumption that it would reveal an autobiographical narrative, if only we as readers could decode it. This tantalising license with biography is glimpsed in embryonic form in Wyatt's selectivity, wresting individual items from Vellutello's poetic life. It emerges, in more ludic and developed form, in later texts, such as George Turberville's *Epitaphes, Epigrams, Songs and Sonnets* (1567), where the tale of Tymes's unsuccessful pursuit of Pyndara is woven sporadically through the text, the reader given only occasional clues as to which poems relate to that story. It erupts more strikingly still in George Gascoigne's *Adventures of Master F. J.* (1573), where a narrative of seduction is teasingly presented under a plethora of initials, prefaced as it is by an exchange of letters between Master H. W. and G. T., reflecting on the doings of F. J., which H. W. has arranged to have published by the printer, A. B. This playfulness is all but lost on us now. Attempts to find Wyatt—and his women—are but one piece of the jigsaw, part of a wider tradition, where Vellutello-like, we endeavour to track down the 'true' story of our lyric poets, as witnessed by the hunt for Shakespeare's dark lady, W. H. or—most recently—Mrs Shakespeare.<sup>102</sup> However, the remains of our poets can prove reluctant to reveal their mysteries, as those Italian scientists, disinterring Petrarch, discovered in 2003. The skull contained within the sepulchre turned out not to be his at all, but that of a woman. We now know Petrarch's mitochondrial DNA and genetic haplotype, or at least those of the male skeleton deposited in his grave:<sup>103</sup> but we are still very far from knowing what he looked like, and staring at him, face-to-face.

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<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Wyatt, 'Blame not my lute' or 'In aeternum'.

<sup>102</sup> Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife* (London, 2007).

<sup>103</sup> This probably is Petrarch's skeleton; damage to his ribs is consistent with that inflicted by a donkey, and it is on record that Petrarch was once kicked by such a beast. For details of Petrarch's DNA, see <[www.isogg.org/famousdna.htm](http://www.isogg.org/famousdna.htm)> [accessed 30 Oct. 2007].