A Late Gothic Vein in Wyatt's "They Fle From Me"

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By asking "what she hath deserued," Thomas Wyatt implied there could be some debate about the matter. The presence of that final question removes the poem from the genre of simple complaint, and reveals how intentionally Wyatt set off the discussion over "They Fle From Me"¹ which even recent readers and critics have joined. Leigh Winser's observing the poem's relationship to the genre of *dubbi* or *questioni d'amore* opens a new perspective: its ambivalence is intentional.² Winser assumes the *dubbio* to represent "a chief amusement of courtly society for many years before Wyatt began reading in the literatures of Renaissance Europe."³ Wyatt supposedly accepted the challenge of proposing a question to entertain the court for an evening, much like Florio in Boccaccio's *Filocolo*.⁴ Although scholarship more recent than that which Winser quotes⁵ has cast doubt on the historical reality of such courtly pastimes, the literary genre did exist.⁶ The connection of Wyatt's poem to that genre underscores that it is a dilemma. Before Winser's observation, critics simply fell into the dilemma and disputed as Wyatt intended they should do.

Their debate has centered on three problems: 1) *who* flees from the poet, 2) what is deserved by the fleer or fleers, and 3) what is the abandoned narrator's frame of mind. Suggestions about who flees in the first stanza have been "does," "birds" (more specifically in one instance "doves of Venus"), and fickle courtiers as figured by does and birds.⁷ Stanza II's imagery has prompted suggestions that a woman has withdrawn her favours deserting the narrator, or that Fortune has, or that both have.⁸ The tendency has been either to read the stanza as exclusively literal, or as metaphorical, or to see that "all images point to one motif, woman's inconstancy, which itself is the central metaphor used as a vehicle for the main theme, the inconstancy of Fortune."⁹ Clearly, determining who "they" are or "she" is must inevitably affect what has been deserved: if a woman, *revenge*; if Fortune, *contempt*.¹⁰

Wyatt's fame in English literature often seems to rest on his having

brought so much of Petrarch's poetry into English. Given his familiarity with the Italian poet, a comparison of Petrarch's *Canzone* No. 323, which has as its theme the loss of a mistress, is interesting. *Canzone* 323 projects "one identical basic motif, the disappearance of Laura" on six stanzas where a "*fera*" with a human face, an ivory and ebony ship, a young laurel, a clear fountain, a phoenix, and a white-clad feminine apparition provide the central images for the motif's elaboration.¹¹ Petrarch orders his stanzas to construct an emotional crescendo as each image adds a facet of the lost Laura;¹² Wyatt's poem by contrast narrates a loss through all three stanzas. The unfolding story uses all three stanzas for its development: those who once sought me out now flee from me; things were once much better for me, and especially when at a peak moment she kissed me and asked me how I liked it; now she has forsaken me for something new. Petrarch retells the loss six times, relating each image to the person of Laura and to her loss; Wyatt depersonalizes or makes his statement abstract. Wyatt's three stanzas tell a single story of loss, but do not construct an independent subject whose loss is complained about. As the pronoun shifts from "they" to "she," the image shifts from wild creatures to a feminine presence. With such shifts, Wyatt detaches the story of loss from a particular person or event.¹³

Like the narrative, the images are also projected over all three stanzas. Something of the fleeing, wild elements,¹⁴ the woman, and Fortune appears in each stanza. Though the animal image ("stalking," "gentle," and "Tame") dominates in the first, "naked fote" evokes already the presence of the woman, and "continual change," while conventionally allowed to refer to woman's nature, can introduce the abstracting principle and appropriately denote Fortune. The "kiss" and the "lose gowne" of stanza II unquestionably describe an encounter with a woman. Her presence works retroactively on the first stanza's "in my chamber" (an odd place for deer, after all). "Put themself in daunger" implies a clandestine relationship which romanticists have liked to think was with Anne Boleyn. Yet the second stanza retains something of the animal image: the fragility of "armes long and small" and the pun on "dere" and "hert" in the final line.

But Fortune is also present in the second stanza from its opening line, "Thancked be fortune." A visual conception of Fortune is incipient in the lines "In thyn arraye" and "a pleasant gyse": Fortune comes in the guise of the woman whose image dominates the stanza. The notion of Fortune also works retroactively to give value to the action "besely seking with a continuell chaunge."¹⁵ Stanza III clarifies the aspect of Fortune that is essential to the poem. "But al is torned," usually interpreted to mean "turned out badly" (and certainly meaning that), contains the image of Fortune's Wheel.

In medieval iconography, four positions represent the wheel's application to kings: *sum sine regno, regnabo, regno, regnavi* in a clockwise course.¹⁶ William Matthews points out Chaucer's use of the Wheel of Fortune in *Troilus and Criseyde* to apply to the affairs of love. The structure of the *Troilus* identifies the positions *sum sine amore, amabo, amo, amavi*.¹⁷ Whether applied to politics or love, the pattern of contrast formed by the narration of a hero's rise and fall characterized the medieval *tragedy of fortune*. That pattern of rise and fall created a structure Matthews described as "pyramidal"; it became "still more typical with the development of the fashion of presenting the story as an autobiographical complaint by the victim." The story was emblematically "a fall, often provided with a contrast in a description of the happy or successful condition which preceded it."¹⁸ Willard Farnham sums up the passage from gothic to Elizabethan tragedy thus:

In stories of ambitious human careers notable for the violent contrast of their rise and fall it finds that the full blow to mortal pride involving attachment to the world and its transitory prizes is best delivered by recording both rise and fall with circumstantiality and making them equally vivid to the reader. Never far from the mind of author or reader is the figure of Fortune and her wheel.¹⁹

In the *tragedy of fortune's* pattern described by Matthews and Farnham, Wyatt's opening complaint identifies in the present tense the low point: "They fle from me that sometye did me seke." Yet the "sometyme" thrusts into the past towards the higher point in the recollection of the happiest moment, "it hath been othrewise." The present tense of "they fle" turns to the past tense with "hath been," modifying in the episodic description of the peak a remembered present tense (in quotation) "how *like* you this?" The downward or "fallen" part of the pattern is accomplished with another present tense (a present perfect) with "all is torned," bringing the narrative back to the level of the first low point.

The image of Fortune's Wheel appears elsewhere in Wyatt's poetry. The Devonshire manuscript CCXXI reads "Ffortune dothe frowne:/What remedye?/I am downe/Bye destenye."²⁰ But perhaps closer to the discussion of Fortune's presence in "They Fle From Me" is Egerton LXV: "Ons as me thought fortune my kyst/And bad me aske what I thought best."²¹ Here the elements common to "They Fle" are 1) *the dream*, posed negatively in "They Fle," "It was no dream, I lay brode waking," 2) *the kiss* and 3) *the question*, indirect in Egerton LXV, "bad me aske what I thought best," direct in "They Fle," "how like you this?" In Egerton LXV, however, Wyatt makes explicit that it is Fortune's kiss. In "They Fle From Me" he leaves whose kiss it is perhaps intentionally

ambiguous. Yet the confluence of detachment from the particular in the imagery, the metaphor of Fortune's Wheel, the structural pattern of a *tragedy of fortune*, and the resemblance to elements Wyatt elsewhere associates with Fortune suggests that Fortune in its manifold aspects is the one who flees.

Determining who flees inevitably affects then the interpretation of "what she hath deserved." R.L. Greene recently concluded that Fortune is not present in the poem because no traits in it correspond to Howard Patch's description of the Goddess Fortuna.²² But the coincidence of the traits observed with Boethius's elaboration of the Wheel if not with Professor Patch's description would seem to warrant considering Fortune a possible flier. Not only did Boethius pervade the Middle Ages with the Wheel metaphor it so loved, but his characterization of Fortune created attitudes in his readers which could influence a decision about "what she hath deserved."²³ In Book II, Prose II, of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius presents a section in the typical medieval juridical framework. Here Fortune defends herself with arguments based on the notion of right:

O thou man, wherefore makestow me gyltyf by thyne every dayes pley-nynges? What wrong have I don the? What godes have I byreft the that weren thyne? Stryf or pleet with me byforn what juge that thow wolt of the possessioun of rychesses or of dignytees;
 . . . I envyrounde the with al the habundance and schynynge of alle goodes that ben *in my right*. Now it liketh me to withdrawe myn hand. Thow hast had grace as he that hath used of foreyne goodes; *thow hast no ryght to pleyne the*, as though thou haddest outrelly forlorn alle thy thynges. Why pleynestow thanne? *I have don the no wrong. Richesses, honours, and swiche othere thynges ben of my right*. My servauntz knowen me for hir lady; *they comen with me, and departen when I wende*. . . . *Schal I thanne, oonly, be defended to usen my ryght?*

Certes it is leveful to the hevene to maken clere dayes, and after that to covenen the same dayes with dirke nyghtes. . . . But *the covetise of men*, that mai nat be stawnched, — *schal it bynde me to ben stedfast, syn that stidfastnesse is uncouth to my maneris?* Swich is my strengthe, and *this pley I pleye continually*. *I torne the whirlynge wheel with the turnynge sercle*; I am glad to chaungen the loweste to the heyeste, and the heyeste to the loweste. *Worth up yif thow wolt, so it be by this lawe, that thow ne holden at that I do the wroong, though thow descende adown whan the resoun of my pley axeth it*. . . .²⁴

With all the power of the Wheel metaphor, the passage dwells on two important points. The rights are Fortune's: man has no title to complain of loss. Nothing he enjoys is his but by the sufferance of Fortune. Further, it is her *kynde* to change continually: "stidfastnesse is uncouth to my maneris."

The legalistic Middle Ages might have seen as a form of contract the passage's proposition that man may mount up if he will, but he may not complain when Fortune's *maneris* require that he descend. The legalism finds expression in Boethius in "*Stryf or pleet with me byforn what jüge that thou wolt.*" And Wyatt appears to adopt the juridical attitude²⁵ in asking his reader to judge the question "what she hath deserved."

The solution, however, is not so simple as has been implied: if "she" is a woman, she deserves *revenge*, if Fortune — though the two possibilities have offered a basis for debate. Winsor concludes his article with the remark, "Is it not also a measure of Wyatt's control over the Renaissance technique for proposing a good question of love that no critic of the poem has remained content with the other's answer?"²⁶ Wyatt's "control" seems to have consisted in constructing in his poem sufficient ambivalence to sustain two positions.

Concrete particularization such as "her lose gowne from her shoulders did fall" creates an emotional pole: thus, by evoking the reactions of jealousy possible in the case of the loss of a particular woman, the final line can carry an angry call to revenge — "I would fain knowe what she hath deserved." Opposing the immediate reaction of outrage, another position, philosophical and reflective, is constructed by such depersonalized formulas as "Besely seking with a continuell change." The shifting of images in the poem establishes a tension between a particularizing (emotional) pole and an abstracting (philosophical) one, as does abstaining from explicitly identifying Fortune. In the Egerton LXV, Wyatt makes clear that it is Fortune who kisses and questions the narrator. His failure to identify "she" with Fortune in "They Fle From Me" does not show that he did not make the association, but that in this case he intends something more.

A deliberately constructed ambivalence may reflect more than imitation of a popular courtly mode. To cope with his own reversed fortunes, Wyatt may have lyrically transposed an interior struggle into a scheme of juridically opposed positions. But the nature of the two positions is such that Wyatt does not offer an "insoluble" question. The implicit Boethian strain carried by the abstracting principle must inevitably dominate. Wyatt's attitude toward his personal misfortunes was at least publicly one of stoical acceptance. The epitaph made him by his friend the Earl of Surrey assigns him precisely that stance:

Amid great storms, whom grace assured so
To live upright and smile at fortune's choice.²⁷

Whatever state of mind, whatever interior ferment may have inspired "They Fle From Me," whether a burning desire to busy the court for an

evening or a personal drama whose resolution is projected on the three stanzas, the poem marks the moment in English literature when the *tragedy of fortune* (so adaptable in the Middle Ages to an exemplary tale) enters to become what it would be for the Elizabethans: the vehicle for an arrogant cry of heroic acceptance.²⁸

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Notes

- 1 For the reader's convenience, I include the text of the poem from *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, ed. Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson (Liverpool: University Press, 1969), p. 27. Other quotations of Wyatt are also from this edition.

They fle from me that sometyme did me seke
With naked fote stalking in my chambre.
I have sene theim gentill tame and meke
That nowe are wyld and do not remembre
That sometyme they put theimself in daunger
To take bred at my hand; and nowe they raunge
Besely seking with a continuell chaunge.

Thancked be fortune, it hath been othrewise
Twenty tymes better; but ons in speciall
In thyn arraye 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 my kysse,
And softly said 'dere hert, how like you this?'

It was no dreame: I lay brode waking.
But all is torned thorough my gentilnes
Into a straunge fasshion of forsaking;
And I have leve to goo of her goodness,
And she also to vse new fangilnes.
But syns that I so kyndely ame serued,
I would fain knowe what she hath deserued.

- 2 Leigh Winser, "The Question of Love Tradition in Wyatt's 'They Fle From Me,'" *Essays in Literature*, 2, No. 1 (Spring, 1975), 3-9.
3 Winser, 3.
4 *Idem*; see also note 5, p. 8.
5 That is, William A. Neilson, *The Origins and Sources of the Courts of Love* (Boston: Ginn, 1899). See for example John Benton, "Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love" in *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, ed. F.X. Newman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1968), pp. 19-42. See also John Benton, "The Court of Champagne as a Literary Center," *Speculum*, 36 (1961), 551-91, and E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Myth of Courtly Love," *Ventures*, V, 2 (1965), 16-23.
6 Paul Rémy, "Les 'cours d'amour': légende et réalité," *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 7 (1954-55), 179-97. Cf. "A Selected Bibliography of the Theory of Courtly Love" in Newman, pp. 97-102.

- 7 For a summary of the poem's criticism, see R.L. Greene, "Wyatt's 'They Fle From Me' and the Busily Seeking Critics," *Bucknell Review*, 12 (1964), 17-30.
- 8 For example, S.F. Johnson, "Wyatt's 'They Fle From Me,'" *Explicator*, 11 (1952-53), 6, 39, and J.D. Hainsworth, "Sir Thomas Wyatt's Use of the Love Convention," *Essays in Criticism*, 7 (1957), 90-95.
- 9 Albert S. Gérard, "Wyatt's 'They Fle From Me,'" *Essays in Criticism*, 11 (1961), 360.
- 10 Gérard, 365.
- 11 Fredi Chiappelli, "An Analysis of Structuration in Petrarch's Poetry," in *Francis Petrarch, Six Centuries Later: A Symposium*, ed. Aldo Scaglione (Chapel Hill and Chicago: NCSRL and the Newberry Library, 1975), pp. 105-16.
- 12 Chiappelli, pp. 110-13.
- 13 For a discussion of the philosophical import in Petrarch, expressed in such lines as *ogni cosa al fin vola or nulla che pianto al mondo dura*, see Chiappelli, pp. 114-15.
- 14 Here again the lack of precision which has caused so much critical debate can suggest a detachment from biographical particulars.
- 15 Greene, pp. 26-27, points out that "deer are animals whose habits, like those of most wild animals, are far removed from even occasional change," i.e., the phrase is hardly appropriate to the central image of the stanza.
- 16 William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur; A Study of the Alliterative "Morte Arthure"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960) p. 106.
- 17 Matthews, p. 107.
- 18 Matthews, p. 106; see also Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936), pp. 99-100.
- 19 Farnham, p. 446.
- 20 Muir, p. 225; the "changing" aspect of Fortune appears elsewhere in Wyatt's poetry, as in Blage CXXX, p. 141: "Thancked be fortune of frendly chaunge/. . . Thancked be fortune of every chaunge/Of my myshappe I thanck my self." Recall also Chaucer's language in his collection of tragedies of fortune, *The Monk's Tale*, "For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee,/Ther may no man the cours of hire witholde" (*Canterbury Tales*, VII, 1995-96), in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 189.
- 21 Muir, p. 47; "Me thought" was used to introduce dream visions in poetry from the medieval period until at least as late as Milton's "Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint."
- 22 Greene, p. 29; Howard R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1927).
- 23 Wyatt's nineteenth-century editor, G.F. Nott, remarks his imitation of Seneca or Boethius in his moral pieces. *The Works of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and of Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder*, ed. G.F. Nott, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst et als, 1815-6), 1, cxvi. Sergio Baldi, *La poesia di Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1953), p. 25, speaks of Wyatt's familiarity with Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* and with the wheel of fortune motif, which continues long into the sixteenth century, as he says.
- 24 The discussion of Wyatt's source for Boethius has centered on the poem "If thou wilt mighty be, flee from the rage," an adaptation of metres 5, 6 and 3 of Book III, *Consolation of Philosophy*. Baldi, p. 236, states that Wyatt used Chaucer's translation. Patricia Thomson has disputed this source in "Wyatt's Boethian Ballade," *Review of English Studies*, N.S. 15, No. 59 (1964), 262 ff. acknowledging, however, that "the only authority I have found who doubts Wyatt's dependence on *Boece* is H.B. Lathrop, *Translations from the Classic into English from Caxton to Chapman, 1477-1620* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature 35, 1933), p. 96." I quote from Chaucer's *Boece* for convenience and do not wish to enter the discussion as to whether Wyatt's source for Boethius was direct

or not, especially since "They Fle From Me" is less closely connected to Boethius than "If thou wilt mighty be." (Robinson, pp. 330-31).

25 The legalistic spirit is expressed as well in the *corti d'amore*, from which come the *dubbi*. See J. Frappier, "Sur un procès fait à l'amour courtois," *Romania*, 93 (1972), 145-93.

26 Winsor, p. 7.

27 John Alfred Langford, *Prison Books and their Authors* (London: William Tegg, 1861), p. 51.

28 Cf. Muir, pp. 246-47, "If euer man might him auant," which shares many elements with "They Fle From Me," including the line "Ech ioy I thought did me embrace" to refer to a period of favourable fortune. The poem concludes, "Sith fortunes will is now so bent/To plage me thus, pore man,/I must my selfe therwith content:/And beare it as I can." Kenneth Muir, *Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool: University Press, 1963), pp. 9-10, points out that in 1527 the Queen asked Wyatt to translate Petrarch's *De remediis utriusque fortunae* for her use. He found it boring and repetitious, preferring to do Plutarch's *Quoyete of Mynde*, which gathered all the important fruits with less "tedyusnesse of length." Both of these treatises show, however, Wyatt's association with works considering Fortune.