

Wyatt and 'Liberty'

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IT is easy, too easy, to think of the word 'liberty' in Wyatt's poems as representing merely a state in which the lover is not a 'thrall' who is 'bond' to a woman he 'serves' according to a conventional code of courtly love. The word would thus be no more than an element of a stereotyped phraseology used almost thoughtlessly. In fact, however, 'liberty' is in a number of instances a word charged with what must to Wyatt have seemed a profound emotional significance, and indicates a psychological freedom from nervous tension which I believe he saw as part of the quietude of mind, security and satisfaction which he so consistently and insistently longed for, as is confirmed by one of the most important discussions of Wyatt to have yet appeared: Donald M. Friedman's 'The "Thing" in Wyatt's Mind' (*Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 16, 1966, pp. 375-81).

The nervous tension is partly inherent, but Wyatt sees it often as occurring when he is desperately in love with a woman who does not answer his need for permanent affection, or possibly his desire. Many poems, in an attempt at retrospective wisdom, see this longing as foolish where the target was impossible or the desire too great. The prison is thus in moments of insight analysed as something the mind partly creates for itself. But even in a rather dreadful paraphrase from Petrarch, 'liberty' is by implication something that the mind might enjoy through more than one solution:

I fynde no peace and all my warr is done;

I fere and hope I burne and freise like yse;

I fley above the wynde yet can I not arrise;

And noght I have and all the worold I seson.

That loseth nor locketh holdeth me in prison

And holdeth me not, yet can I scape no wise ..

(XXVI, 1-61)

He is held 'in prison' because his 'liberty' is lacking either way: his longing is not reciprocated, nor is he emotionally

detached. While here he shows little awareness of the fact that if his mind was foolish enough to become its own jailer, so it may release itself, he does see more than one possible exit, and our sense of his mental anguish is made the more intense. The problem is put with greater clarity and intelligence in poem XXI:

It may be good, like it who list,
 But I do dowbt: who can me blame?
 For oft assured yet have I myst,
 And now again I fere the same:
 The wyndy wordes, the Ies quaynt game,
 Of soden chaunge maketh me agast :
 For dred to fall I stond not fast.
 Alas! I tred an endles maze
 That seketh to accorde two contraries;
 And hope still, and nothing hase,
 Imprisoned in libertes . . . (1-11)

'Imprisoned in libertes' : here he seems to realize very clearly, not only that there are two ways to 'liberty', but that one of them can only be found if one can rely on one's partner. 'Liberty' is enjoyed if the mind is at ease, without suspicion of change in the other. Moreover, we are given a better insight into the speaker's weakness, the sensitive imagination which will find 'liberty' a state difficult to attain. Because he anticipates a possible fall, he does not stand 'fast'. To such a mind, a victim of neurosis despite reassurances, 'liberty' must be cherished indeed, because a mere change in circumstances will not necessarily suffice to procure it. 'Liberty' is thus a mental state not only because it can occur in more than one circumstance, but also because the mind must make an effort to create it within itself.

If he only had 'liff and libertie', Wyatt says in LXVII
 chance assynd):

Then were I sure
 I myght endure
 The displeasure
 Of crueltie,

Where now I plain
 Alas in vain,
 Lacking my liff for libertie. (8-14)

Whether he would obtain 'liberty' if the woman satisfied his longing or if he succeeded in disentangling himself emotionally matters less than that 'liberty' would enable him to bear suffering. His absorbing concern is again for a state of mind. An imprisoned mind, emotionally enslaved to the woman, is vulnerable; a free mind is not unduly sensitive to an outside attack like 'crueltie'.

'Liberty' is a goal to be sought by the mind, with considerable effort, even when the mind is aware, not only that it cannot have the object of its desire, but also that it must rid itself of its desire if it is to gain peace. This is the theme of CCII:

Now must I lerne to lyue at rest
 And weyne me of my wyll,
 Ffor I repent where I was prest My
 fansy to ffullfyll. (1-4)

He tells us he 'must lerne to put in vre /The change of womanhede (7-8)', but we do not forget the first stanza when the last informs us :

I aske none other Remedy
 To recompence my wrong,
 But ones to haue the lyberty That I
 haue lakt so long. (25-28)

Obviously the 'lyberty' here is virtually equivalent to the 'rest' of stanza one, the desired outcome of an attempt to wean the mind from its 'wyll' (here, as often in Wyatt, probably particularly 'carnal desire').

Again and again Wyatt realises that 'liberty' is a state of mind due to freedom from neurotic tension, particularly that which it experiences when in the grip of restless, frustrated longing for a woman. In CCXXIV ('Tanglid I was yn loves snare') he partly blames his own 'To grete desire' (19) and 'wanton will' (20) for the loss of his mental freedom, and in CXCVIII ('Synes loue ys suche that, as E

ye wott') he sees 'fredome' (20);—clearly a metrical variant, here, for 'liberty'—not as something achieved by dismissing any kind of love from the mind, but by substituting mature love 'sure and fast' (24) for the boundless `wyll' (12) of what he here considers the immature attitude of his youth.

The examples show beyond a doubt that 'liberty' is not a mental peace attainable only outside love. It can arise in mature love, but not in immature love characterized by instability, excess of restless desire, doting where affection is not returned. Moreover, it can arise where love is not in question at all. It is hardly likely to be a coincidence that Wyatt says in CVI ('My mothers maydes when they did Bowe and spyne'):

Make playn thyn hert that it be not *knotted*
 With hope or dred and se thy will be bare
 From all affectes whome vice hath ever spotted . . .
 (92-4; my italics)

This is advice given to those who would experience the `thing' (98) within the mind which Friedman has correctly identified with 'satisfaction, stability, steadfastness' (*E in C*, Vol. 16, p. 376). But clearly the mind needs to be 'free' to experience this, and not—or at least not simply—from amorous longing, but from any emotion which is attended by 'hope or dred', and the desirous will is to rid itself from all vicious passions. The country mouse that had forgotten 'her poure suretie and rest' (68) came to mischief, not simply because she came to town, but because she imprisoned her mind in desire for the sensual pleasure of town even before she went there. Immature love is not part of this context; general immature sensual desire is. And of course it is significant that life at court is seen as a 'prison' in CCLIX (In court to serue decked with freshe aray'), and, by implication, in CV ('Myne owne John Poyntz, sins ye delight to know'). In the latter poem particularly, sensual desire is only part of a whole mental world (hypocrisy, cruelty, tyranny, etc.) from which the mind should dissociate itself, but Wyatt's aversion is so strong that he pretends that his retraction is voluntary, and claims he is 'at libertie' (84) though he has a `clogg' hanging at his heel

(86). Yet the detached attitude is belied not only by his rationalization, but also by his involvement in what he denounces. This is typical. Although he regularly sees 'liberty' as something which the mind must and wants to achieve, we hardly feel that his mind is likely to succeed if it is not aided by external circumstances, such as affection unexpectedly reciprocated, or a 'freedom' imposed upon him by the refusal of a mistress or by a political order. Surrey probably did not exaggerate much when he said that Wyatt could never rest.

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NOTE

'All quotations are taken from Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson, eds., *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool, 1969), and poems are referred to by their (Roman) numbers in this edition. To facilitate reference to other editions, I have invariably quoted first lines. It will be obvious even from the first example quoted that the punctuation (mostly, but not always, Muir's own) is far from satisfactory; nor is the reproduction of the actual words in the best sources entirely reliable. (See my review of the Muir-Thomson edition in *AUMLA* 35.)

Not all of the poems discussed are necessarily Wyatt's, though all except CCII, CCXXIV, and CXCVIII are attributed to him in the known sources. All the examples usefully illustrate certain preoccupations in the verse of the period, even if some are not by Wyatt.