

These Bloody Days: Prison, Treason, and the Birth of Literary Witness in the Poetry of Sir

Thomas Wyatt

By

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate program in the Department of English Language and

Literature in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Queen's University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

August, 2015

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the life and work of Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) through the lens of the works he produced within and about his experiences of incarceration on charges of treason under Henry VIII of England (1509-1547). Through a close analysis of contemporary primary documents as well as Wyatt's poetry, this thesis situates Wyatt's experiences as a prisoner and writer within the historical context of the political crises of Henry VIII's reign, exploring what Wyatt's writing reveals about the changing conceptions of treason and the traumatic experience of imprisonment for a member of the political elite in Henrician England, while also considering how Wyatt's writing gives rise to a new form of literary witness in the English literary tradition.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Elizabeth Hanson and Professor Marta Straznicky of Queen's University, whose willingness to fulfil the roles of supervisor and second reader respectively made it possible for me to undertake the writing of an MA thesis in the first place. Their support and astute advice throughout the process has been invaluable, and is greatly appreciated. I gratefully acknowledge my debt to Professor Jason Powell of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who kindly offered his insights and advice on the questions of attribution in the Wyatt canon when I first began the research for this thesis. I would also like to thank the Early Modernists amongst my undergraduate professors at Brock University, especially Professor Leah Knight, Professor Elizabeth Sauer, and Dr. Elizabeth Campbell, all of whom have dazzled me with their brilliance and honoured me with their unflinching support for my own developing academic career. Personal debts are also due, of course, to my family and friends for their love and encouragement.

My work at Queen's was made possible through the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which awarded me a Joseph Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship (Master's Program) for the duration of my MA degree. I am deeply honoured to have received such generous funding from a government organization that recognizes the value of supporting the research of Graduate students and established academics alike.

My most unusual debt is to Sir Thomas Wyatt himself: for the past two years I have spent countless hours immersed in his work and world, and remain amazed at the endless riches to be found in his haunting poetry and prose. I hope that this thesis is worthy of his memory.

Table of Contents

Abstract ..... i

Acknowledgements. .... ii

Chapter I. Introduction: Prison and the Poet ..... 1

Chapter II. In a Cage Enclosed: Trauma and Imprisonment in Sir Thomas Wyatt’s Poetry. .... 7

Chapter III. As I Did Say, That is No Treason: Sir Thomas Wyatt’s *Defence* and the Dangers of  
Language. .... 33

Chapter IV. Conclusion: The Birth of Literary Witness. .... 52

Works Cited. .... 56

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978)

## Chapter I

### *Introduction: Prison and the Poet*

As generations of scholars and students have recognized, the reign of Henry VIII of England (1509-1547) was a revolution in more ways than one. The increasing centralization of power under the Tudor dynasty brought to an end the feudal system of medieval England, giving rise to a political hierarchy in which power and position were achieved primarily through service to the king (Mears 707). As the traditional privileges of the landed aristocracy slowly eroded, the new Tudor ideal of service meant that even lowborn men such as Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell could rise to positions of prominence within the Henrician court. Driving this social revolution was a political and religious one: the centralization of power in the figure of the king and his court was accelerated and solidified upon Henry VIII's break with the Roman Catholic Church in the 1530s, leading to Henry VIII declaring himself the Supreme Head of a new, nationalized Protestant church. The role of the English monarch, no longer at the mercy of feuding aristocratic factions or smarting under the authority of the Pope, had come into its own. The problem now, of course, was how to maintain these newfound powers.

For Henry VIII, the solution lay in the strict enforcement of conformity and obedience amongst English subjects, something that could only be achieved through the suppression of any and all forms of resistance and dissent. As is well known, in the wake of his marriage to Anne Boleyn Henry demanded that his subjects swear oaths of obedience and allegiance to him (Walker 24). Those who balked at the idea of recognizing Henry's ultimate jurisdiction in matters spiritual as well as temporal, as Sir Thomas More famously did, were punished for their scruples with accusations of treason and eventual execution. If the desire for a legitimate male heir haunted Henry VIII throughout all of his marital misadventures, then the possibility of

disobedience amongst his subjects in response to the extension of royal power provided the impetus for Henry's increasing obsession with betrayal and treason. According to John Bellamy,

In contrast to the later medieval period the Tudor era is remarkable in the history of treason for the large amount of legislation which concerned itself with that subject.

Between 1485 and 1603, according to one calculation, there were no fewer than sixty-eight treason statutes enacted, though there had been less than ten in the period 1352-1485. (12)

Treason, Henry believed, was everywhere, and as the king's powers grew, so too did his penchant for unpredictable and paranoid behaviour towards those whose lives and fortunes now depended upon the whims of royal favour. As G.W. Bernard writes, "Most remarkable about Henry's reign, indeed unparalleled, is how many of those who at some point were close to him and served him well suddenly found themselves not just out of favour but on trial for their lives and condemned to death" (11). One of the courtiers caught up in sensational treason scandals under Henry VIII also happened to be one of the most important poets in Early Modern England: Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Sir Thomas Wyatt found himself in danger of losing his life twice, once in 1536, and again in 1541. On both occasions, Wyatt was confined to the Tower of London, a fact that introduces another important aspect of Henry VIII's political revolution into the frame: with the rise of English monarchical absolutism and the attendant fixation on exerting increasing control over courtiers and subjects alike, imprisonment on charges of treason became an ever-present possibility for those who, like Wyatt, were a part of the political elite at court. The unexpected side-effect of rising rates of imprisonment amongst the elite was that these prisoners, as

belonging to a highly literate class in society, could leave records of their carceral experiences.

As Ruth Ahnert explains,

In the centuries prior to the Reformation, we find only isolated examples of English literature produced during incarceration. By contrast, the religious and political instability of the Tudor reigns, especially during the period between the late 1520s and Mary I's death in 1558, provided the conditions for prison literature to thrive. (*Rise 2*)

Prison literature under the Tudors and Stuarts, far from being limited to the occasional scrap of verse, eventually “became one of England’s most characteristic cultural forms in the period” (Freeman 133). Wyatt is one of the earliest Tudor courtiers and poets to have undergone imprisonment and, more importantly, has left behind traces of these experiences in his writing. Besides poems composed within or about experiences of imprisonment, Wyatt wrote a lengthy document during his 1541 incarceration, the *Defence*, a prose work invaluable not only for its historical significance as a legal defence in a treason trial, but also as a work that interrogates the terms of the infamous 1534 Treasons Act, raising issues about the very nature of language and writing in the Henrician court. Wyatt’s work is thus situated at the very beginnings of prison literature in the Early Modern period, and through an analysis of these works, we can explore both the material and psychological effects of imprisonment and treason for a courtier in Henrician England.

It is therefore essential to consider here, in light of the historical and political context of Wyatt’s prison writing, precisely what prison writing is, and what the wider implications of this phenomenon are. My answer to this question is twofold. Firstly, prison writing, although now increasingly recognized as a special category of writing in the Early Modern era, is a rather problematic term whenever scholars attempt to represent it as a genre. After all, not all prisoners,



even amongst the elite, chose to write directly of their experiences. Likewise, there are poems rich in prison imagery and a sense of confinement, particularly in the Wyatt canon, that were composed when the poet was an ostensibly free man. My own solution for the purposes of this thesis is to use the term *prison writing* to refer to works Wyatt composed as explicit depictions of his actual prison experiences, applying the term in a very literal sense to works that serve to explore the psychological and material conditions of life within the walls of the Tower, whether they were composed during his incarcerations or in hindsight. However, I would also like to introduce a new term and concept that will expand our understanding of what imprisonment is, which leads me to the second part of my solution: as the pervasiveness of prison imagery in even Wyatt's non-carceral verse attests, the Henrician court itself was dominated by a *culture of imprisonment*, whereby the pressures exerted upon the king's courtiers and subjects in matters of conscience and the unprecedented limitations imposed upon subjects' speech served to create an oppressive, claustrophobic political and social climate that made even the lives of supposedly free men seem precarious and confined. As my analysis of Wyatt's life and work throughout the course of this thesis will demonstrate, *all* courtiers were prisoners of the king's increasingly tyrannical rule, not only because the volatile nature of royal favour made the transitions between courtier to prisoner and back again so alarmingly fluid, but because the Henrician court itself offered the same sense of entrapment even in the midst of all manner of luxury and prestige.

Since the importance of prison literature as a social phenomenon has only recently come to the attention of Early Modern historians and literary critics, questions of method and interpretation are still largely open-ended. My own approach has been to situate Wyatt's prison writings firmly within the historical and biographical context of Wyatt's own life. I draw upon primary documents for the framing of my analysis of the poems, most importantly Wyatt's own

*Defence*, but also the letter written by Dr. Edmund Bonner to Cromwell in 1538 accusing Wyatt of treason, and the 1534 Treasons Act itself. When selecting non-carceral poems for analysis, I have chosen to study only those that are confidently associated with Wyatt through attributions in manuscript. My analysis is divided into two chapters, each of which incorporates both the *Defence* and selections from Wyatt's poetry to understand different aspects of Wyatt's imprisonment and prison writing. In the first chapter, "In a Cage Enclosed: Trauma and Imprisonment in Sir Thomas Wyatt's Poetry", I examine the traumatic effects of imprisonment upon the courtier as they are manifested in both the *Defence* and the poems Wyatt composed during or about his imprisonments, while also arguing that the use of prison imagery in his non-carceral verse speaks to a growing culture of imprisonment within the Henrician court. In the second chapter, "As I Did Say, That is No Treason: Sir Thomas Wyatt's *Defence* and the Dangers of Language", I take a closer look at the *Defence*, subjecting a number of passages to close readings in order to study the rhetorical strategies Wyatt uses to exonerate himself from the charges of high treason laid against him. Furthermore, I examine poems concerned with the dangers of language and the risks of betrayal in light of the issues raised by Wyatt throughout the *Defence*.

Taken as a whole, the purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that Wyatt's poetry and prose, as both records of imprisonment and evidence of a more insidious culture of imprisonment at the Henrician court, not only reflects a court and country in the midst of a political crisis, but also heralds the birth of prison writing as a form of literary witness in the English literary tradition. The act of literary witness, as found in Wyatt's prison-centric work, is a particular vehicle for depicting political trauma and the personal feelings and dilemmas such experiences occasion in an individual. While any poet may use his work to serve as testimony to how he feels

in a given situation, such as that of a rejected or jilted lover, literature composed as a response to wider political and social crises serves a powerful dual function: in Wyatt, the act of witnessing is a means of recording and critiquing the abuses of a tyrannical king, creating a counter-narrative to royalist propaganda; it also privileges the subjective experience of the individual in the midst of events of great historical importance, reminding us that pressed under the weight of oppressive regimes are individuals whose sufferings are acute and worthy of acknowledgment and remembrance. As we shall see, Wyatt was never fated to play the role of a radical dissident, remaining a privately ambivalent but still outwardly loyal courtier of the king until his death. Nevertheless, through his transformation of his lyrics into vehicles for this form of literary witness during one of England's bloodiest and most memorable reigns, Wyatt – poetic innovator, lifelong courtier, and sometime prisoner – started a revolution all his own.

## Chapter II

### *In a Cage Enclosed: Trauma and Imprisonment in Sir Thomas Wyatt's Poetry*

In a letter dated 2 September 1538, Dr. Edmund Bonner, one of Henry VIII's ambassadors at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, wrote to Thomas Cromwell about his misgivings about the king's main ambassador in Spain, Sir Thomas Wyatt. Amidst a catalogue of complaints ranging from the petty to the downright treacherous, Bonner sought to undermine Wyatt's position not only abroad, but back home in England as well: Wyatt's heart, Bonner complained, was not quite in his job, and his loyalty to the king was suspect. The reason behind Wyatt's supposedly sullen, arrogant, and vengeful attitude towards ambassadorial service was that he had never quite recovered from a life-altering experience that had taken place two years before, during one of the most tumultuous years in Henry VIII's reign: "I mislike that Mr. Wyat, touching his legation with themperour, dooth often call to his remembrance his emprisonment in the Towere," Bonner writes, "which semeth soo to sticke in his stomacke that he can not forget it" (Muir 66). Towards the end of his letter, Bonner reiterates that Wyatt will never be truly trustworthy as an ambassador unless or until "he will eyther forget his emprisonment, or moore regarde thaffairs of the king then his own glorie" (68). Thomas Cromwell, a close friend of Wyatt's, ignored Bonner's accusations, but in 1541 Bonner's devious missive resurfaced in the wake of Cromwell's fall, and Wyatt found himself arrested and imprisoned once again on charges of high treason (Brigden 21).

Stripped of his property, bereft of his former powerful protector, and battling for his life, Wyatt composed his *Defence* from his cell in the Tower, and during his methodical and defiant debunking of each of Bonner's claims, dared to confront the question of his feelings towards his first imprisonment. "[L]et vs examen everie poynte therof 'Wyatt grudged at his fyrst puttinge in the towere'. Yf theye take grudginge for beinge sorie or grevinge, I will not styke with them: I

graunt yt; and so I thynke it wolde do to any here,” Wyatt admitted, but added that he “neuer so grudged” as Bonner insinuated (200), and has fostered no desire for revenge against the king (201). Not long afterwards, Wyatt revisits this theme in much the same terms, writing,

[Y]f by grudginge theie meane revengynge you se how substancially yt is proved; and yf by grudginge theie meene moninge, theie nead not prove yt, I graunt yt. Will any mane then that hathe honestie, wyt or dyscretion gather that bycawse I bemoned my imprysonment that therfore I have malyce and wolde revenge? Will any man that hathe Chrystiane charite and any conscience vpone suche a maliciouse getheringe frame an accusation vpone a mans lyf? (202)

In both of these passages from the *Defence*, Wyatt raises two points that are of particular interest. Firstly, he acknowledges that his imprisonment in 1536 has indeed created a lasting impression upon him, admitting that the experience continues to make him “sorie”, full of “grievinge”, and prone to “moninge” at the remembrance of his misfortune. His reiteration of the abrupt phrase “I graunt yt” clearly signals that to disguise his feelings on the matter would be futile. Secondly, he appeals to the humanity of his judges on this point, stating in the first passage that imprisonment surely “wolde do to any here” what it has done to him, and in the second calling upon men of “honestie, wyt or dyscretion” and “Chrystiane charitie and . . . conscience” to ask themselves why Bonner should dare to draw a direct line from Wyatt’s natural “bemon[ing]” to a desire for “malyce” and “revenge” against the king. A man, Wyatt implies here, cannot help but be scarred by such an experience as imprisonment, but struggling to master lingering feelings of sorrow and regret does not mean one is tempted to become a traitor because of it. Whatever may have happened to him in the past, Wyatt insists throughout his *Defence* that he has always been, and remains, the king’s true and loyal subject.

At one level, historians and literary critics alike can take Wyatt at his word, as Wyatt's life-long devotion to service under Henry VIII is evidence enough of his deep-seated commitment to the duties of a courtier. But there is also another story at work in the passages quoted above, and it is a significant one: here, in his own words, Wyatt affords us a glimpse into the mental and emotional costs of political imprisonment in Henrician England, and to the ongoing effects it has had upon him. In this chapter, therefore, I will explore two aspects of Wyatt's poetry that speak to the experience, both material and mental, of imprisonment. I will begin with an examination of three poems<sup>1</sup> written explicitly about or during Wyatt's 1536 and 1541 imprisonments in the Tower to demonstrate that these poems serve as a form of literary witness to the political crises of Henry VIII's reign, while also granting the reader an unforgettable portrait of the psychological effects of trauma upon the individual speaker. I will then examine a selection of poems composed by Wyatt outside of prison, all of which nevertheless feature the imagery of imprisonment as a means of depicting the world of the Henrician courtier, arguing that these poems testify to the birth of a culture of imprisonment at the Henrician court, in which even the day-to-day life of a courtier seemingly at liberty is haunted by an oppressive, claustrophobic political climate that suffocates and entraps him.

Wyatt's most famous prison poem, "Who list his wealth and ease retain"(Rebholz 155), was composed during the chaos of Anne Boleyn's downfall in 1536, and its ability to testify simultaneously to a reign in crisis and the experience of individual trauma is perhaps unparalleled in the English literary tradition. Anne Boleyn, after a marriage of barely three years' duration, had at last run out of luck after the birth of an unwanted daughter, two miscarriages,

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<sup>1</sup> I have decided to exclude "In mourning wise" (Rebholz 255-256) from my analysis, for although long attributed to Wyatt, there is no firm evidence for Wyatt's authorship. This point was stressed to me by Professor Jason Powell, the current leading expert on Wyatt's manuscripts, in an email. I am grateful for Professor Powell's guidance on this issue.

and a volatile relationship with the king that was perpetually marred by fits of anger and disillusionment on both sides. Queen Anne was accused of adultery, incest, and treason, and her fall, as swift as it was merciless, implicated a group of courtiers that included Wyatt:

In the first week of May the queen, her brother, Lord Rochford, Henry Norris, groom of the stool and the nearest to a friend that the king could have, Francis Weston, William Brereton, Mark Smeaton, Richard Page and Wyatt were sent to the Tower . . . The news at court was that Wyatt was imprisoned ‘without danger of death’, sometimes that he would ‘suffer with the others’. (Brigden 4-5)

Out of all of the men listed above, Wyatt was the only one to escape with his life. Although Susan Brigden writes that the reason for Wyatt’s eventual release “is unknown” (5), Wyatt’s close encounter with treason and death was evidently painfully memorable. In the third stanza of “Who list his wealth and ease retain”, the speaker declares: “These bloody days have broken my heart / My lust, my youth, did them depart” alongside the “blind desire of estate” (11-13), immediately invoking the personal effects the crisis has had upon him. Having witnessed the downfall of others, the speaker’s situation has now been changed irrevocably: his own heart is “broken”, a line that speaks succinctly to a sense of personal loss and tragedy amidst the general turmoil of the “bloody days” of 1536, while the abrupt departure of his “lust” and “youth” implies that the speaker’s experiences have aged him prematurely, leaving him without vitality. His acknowledgement that “blind desire of estate” has fled along with his youth hints at the perils of overreaching oneself in the deadly games of favour and rank in the Henrician court, tying the speaker’s own former desire to rise and the painful lesson he has been taught about the price of such ambitions into the poem’s overall theme of the value of an obscure and humble existence.

The experience the speaker has lived through then becomes more specifically recalled and defined, for as the speaker recounts in the poem's fourth stanza:

The bell tower showed me such a sight  
That in my head sticks day and night.  
There did I learn out of a grate,  
That for all favour, glory, or might,  
That yet *circa Regna tonat*. (16-20)

The reference to the “bell tower” situates the scene of witnessing within the Tower of London, the usual prison for “prisoners of state” (Murray 151), signalling to the reader that the speaker has not just been a sympathetic, third-party observer of the plight of others, but has himself been directly in danger of annihilation. The speaker thus testifies not merely as a learned authority of Stoic maxims, as he appears to be in the poem's first two stanzas, but as someone who has himself experienced what awaits those who succumb to the “blind desire of estate”, and narrowly escaped to tell the tale. He does not speak as someone who watched the executions amongst the crowd assembled at the gallows, but as a prisoner, who could only “learn out of a grate” – the bars of his prison – this lesson in royal rage and arbitrary justice, that *circa Regna tonat*. The relationship between the refrain *circa Regna tonat*, a line from Seneca's tragedy *Phaedra*, and the traumatic process of “learn[ing]” within the context of direct, lived experience, also speaks to the complicated tensions between the Humanist tradition to which Wyatt belonged and the realities of existence in Henrician England. The life and writing of Seneca was closely associated in the minds of Humanist intellectuals with tyranny, and Early Modern writers frequently used adaptations of, or allusions to, Seneca's work as a means of covertly discussing the horrifying effects of absolute power in their own time (Woodbridge 130). Wyatt's own use of Seneca here



can thus be seen as a means of alluding to Henrician tyranny through inviting parallels between Seneca's situation under Emperor Nero and his own as a courtier under Henry VIII, but it is the source of the Senecan refrain that is worthy of particular notice: in *Phaedra*, the tragic action reaches its height when the titular protagonist, whose amorous advances have been rebuffed by her stepson, commits suicide, leaving behind a note falsely accusing her stepson of rape. This allusion is therefore not just a convenient shorthand for tyranny, but a subtle nod to the very notion of being falsely accused and forced to pay the price for crimes one has not committed. On one level, then, this stanza – and by extension, the poem as a whole – seems to confirm the truth of the Senecan maxim that power is dangerous and arbitrary and that a life of quiet retreat is vastly preferable to that of worldly service, yet the speaker's choice of the verb “learn” in line 18 calls into question the utility of such maxims when confronted with the horror of “bloody days” that are not studied in the abstract within a schoolroom or private closet, but actually *lived*. The speaker seems to be suggesting that one can learn Stoic maxims and study the works of classical authors, seeking advice and solace in their works, but that ultimately one can only truly “learn” the truth of what they say, and what violent power really is, through the trauma of personal experience. In the face of such horrors, the speaker raises the question as to what use, if any, such maxims and commonplaces are in the midst of real, private tragedy.

This tension between learning in the abstract and learning through direct experience depicts a situation in which the speaker is struggling – and failing – to define his experience in terms he can understand. On that note, the most moving and memorable detail in this stanza, for my purposes here, is the one contained in its first two lines: “The bell tower showed me such a sight / That in my head sticks day and night”, for as Cathy Caruth explains,

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience. (“Trauma and Experience” 4)

The speaker in this poem, then, is showing symptoms of what modern psychologists would now recognize as trauma, through his obsessive reliving of the terrible scene of execution he has witnessed, which “in [his] head sticks day and night”. As Ruth Ahnert observes, “Whilst the recollection of looking out of the grate is rendered in the past tense, the present-continuous tense of ‘stekys’ [sticks] suggests that the process by which this event is being written into his head is ongoing” (“Inscribed” 158). The traumatic event has passed, but in his “head” it lives on, over and over again, with “day and night” serving to emphasize the constant, unrelenting intrusion of these unwanted recollections and images into the mind of the speaker. The shift in tenses that Ahnert notes also speaks to a symptom of trauma in the sense that time itself has become distorted, destabilizing the usual demarcations between past and present and rendering the speaker unable to move forward, returning instead to the memory he cannot fully process. This obsessive mental trait in the speaker resembles what Caruth would call a “failed return”, the hallmark of an event “the mind misses and then repeatedly attempts to grasp” in the aftermath of a traumatic experience (*Literature* 15). It is also worth noting that the speaker refrains from directly describing what he has witnessed, preferring instead to make the more subtle and vague allusion to how “the bell tower showed [him] such a sight”, without defining what that “sight” is. Ahnert interprets this as a deliberate rhetorical strategy on Wyatt’s part, claiming, “This change in the expected trajectory of the verse demonstrates that the poem is not commemorating a death,

but rather memorializing Wyatt's witnessing of it" (156). Ahnert's insight is astute, but I would suggest that alongside the urge to place the emphasis on the act of witnessing, there is another layer: the speaker, overwhelmed by what he has seen, cannot find the words to describe it – his trauma, his inability to fully assimilate what he has experienced, leaves him speechless before the images that haunt him, forcing him to forgo relating the scene itself. This poem is thus not merely a typical moralizing lesson in the ways of the world, nor even primarily an eyewitness account of the downfall of Anne Boleyn and her alleged lovers, but a text testifying to an actual prisoner's personal close escape from death and its traumatic after-effects, exposing imprisonment as a brutalizing experience that traumatizes the Henrician courtier long after the "bloody days" appear to have ended.

The depiction of trauma as a strangely circular, ongoing experience that the speaker cannot fully or effectively grasp is depicted in greater detail in "The flaming sighs" (Rebholz 88-89), a poem Brigden dates to Wyatt's 1541 imprisonment (19). In the opening lines of the first stanza, the speaker offers a painstaking portrait of his mental state as he languishes in his cell:

The flaming sighs that boil within my breast  
Sometime break forth and they can well declare  
The heart's unrest and how that it doth fare,  
The pain thereof, the grief, and all the rest.  
The watered eyes from whence the tears do fall  
Do feel some force or else they would be dry.  
The wasted flesh of colour dead can try  
And something tell what sweetness is in gall. (1-8)

In these lines, the speaker offers his reader a portrait of both the physical and mental suffering resulting from imprisonment, with “flaming sighs” (1), “heart’s unrest” (3) “watered eyes” (5), and “pain” and “grief” (4) all testifying to an inner turmoil that seemingly knows no alleviation or release. Physically, the speaker is starting to resemble a corpse, exhibiting “the wasted flesh of colour dead” (7), with both *wasted* and *dead* invoking decay, as if the speaker in his prison cell has been buried alive. As in “Who list his wealth and ease retain”, Wyatt avoids giving too many explicit details about the context of his experience, preferring instead in these lines to look away from the external factors causing his torment, with only the vague hint that his “eyes” (5) are filled with tears because they “feel some force or else they would be dry” (6). Read in isolation from the rest of the poem and outside of the context of composition, such a list of physical ailments and inward suffering can sound closely akin to the more clichéd laments of a Petrarchan lover, but as in the Senecan maxims discussed above in “Who list his wealth”, Wyatt draws upon such literary commonplaces only to complicate and subvert them: the hyperbolic sufferings of a lover in Petrarchan verses are here rehearsed, only to be reborn and challenged by the immediacy of a lived experience that will turn such stale and tired tropes into symptoms of real suffering by the poem’s end, once more hinting at the distressing gaps between literary tropes and the realities of personal trauma. Later in the first stanza, the speaker mentions his “wearied mind” (10), another nod to his physical and mental exhaustion, before concluding with, “The wound, alas, hap in some other place / From whence no tool away the scar can rase” (13-14). As I shall discuss below, the imagery of a “wound” whose scar “no tool” will “rase” or efface will reappear in “Sighs are my food” (Rebholz 99), another poem dating from this imprisonment, but what is important to discuss here is the echo of the scar imagery in Wyatt’s *Defence*, in which he bitterly writes, “These men thinkethe yt inoughe to accuse and as these sclaundersers vse for a generall

rule – whome thou lovest not, accuse. For tho he hele the wounde yet the scharre shall remayne” (193). Just as the execution scene in “Who list his wealth and ease retain” is referred to obliquely as “such a sight” (16), so too does the speaker in “The flaming sighs” remain vague, choosing to omit details just when they seem to be of the greatest urgency and necessity, instead only remarking that the “wound” that torments him lies not in his “wearied mind”, but in “some other place” (13). In the *Defence*, of course, Wyatt has no choice but to be explicit, defining the “scharre” as the lasting stigma of having been accused of treason and imprisoned, for even if the “wounde” should “hele” through legal acquittal and restoration to royal favour, “the scharre shall remayne”. As Thomas S. Freeman writes, “the possible destruction of reputation inherent in any incarceration must have created enough psychological discomfort to appease all but [the prisoner’s] worst enemies” (140), and it is this tortured awareness of the permanent loss of face and identity that the speaker subtly refers to in “The flaming sighs”. This sense of an experience that can never be fully overcome or satisfactorily integrated into one’s past or identity once more speaks to trauma, with the “scar” of a damaged reputation complementing a mind and body altered beyond recognition by what the speaker has undergone.

In the second stanza of the poem, the shadowy language of a trial begins to appear, as the speaker turns directly to his addressee – apparently Sir Francis Bryan (Brigden 19) – calling upon him to take note of his plight and commiserate with him in it:

But you that of such like have had your part  
Can best be judge. Wherefore, my friend so dear,  
I thought it good my state should now appear  
To you and that there is no great desert.  
And whereas you in weighty matters great,

Of fortune saw the shadow that you know,

For trifling things I now am stricken so. (15-21)

In declaring in these lines that his addressee can “best be judge” of his plight (16), and describing the way in which the speaker “thought it good [his] state should now appear” to his friend (17), there is a sense of a private trial and judgement being enacted in this verse. The addressee, called upon to “judge” and empathize with the speaker’s situation since the addressee himself has “had [his] part” of such misfortunes as well (15), is now presented with “the state” of the speaker, which “appear[s]” before the addressee like an accused arraigned within a courtroom. Yet, as the speaker complains, his sufferings are unjust, for “there is no great desert” that has brought him to this pitiful state (18), but rather, he is “stricken” in the name of “trifling things” (21). There is no justice, no sense, in what the speaker is undergoing, while the reference to the “shadow that you know” in line 20 once more offers another mysterious, indirect hint at the cause of such misfortunes, with the image of a “shadow” itself conjuring up the notion of something not quite there, not quite capable of being grasped and mastered. The speaker, left to languish in this limbo for reasons that are “trifling”, closes the poem with the warning and wish that “who hath health and liberty alway / Let him thank God and let him not provoke / To have the like of this my painful stroke” (26-28). This parting piece of advice echoes the injunction that closes “Who list his wealth and ease retain”, in which the speaker urges his reader to “Bear low, therefore, give God the stern” (24) in the face of cruel and arbitrary royal power. “The flaming sighs” can thus be seen as a sort of parallel text to the *Defence*, which enables Wyatt to serve as a witness to the sort of unpredictable and “trifling things” that can bring a courtier to the brink of death in Henrician England, while also serving as a record of the personal costs of imprisonment and the impossibility of a full recovery. In “The flaming sighs”, as in “Who list his wealth and ease

retain”, poetry itself becomes a form of testimony, a way of pushing back against the language of legality and false accusations that has threatened to destroy Wyatt whole.

In “Sighs are my food” (Rebholz 99), a brief epigrammatic poem once again addressed to Sir Francis Bryan in 1541, some of the same themes and images found in “The flaming sighs” recur, lending a remarkable consistency to the ways in which Wyatt chooses to write of his prison experiences:

Sighs are my food, drink are my tears;  
Clinking of fetters such music would crave.  
Stink and close air my life away wears.  
Innocency is all the hope I have.  
Rain, wind, or weather I judge by mine ears.  
Malice assaulted that righteousness should save.  
Sure I am, Brian, this wound shall heal again  
But yet, alas, the scar shall still remain. (1-8)

The same pervasive sense of sorrow is here, with “Sighs” and “tears” (1) serving to represent the inner struggles of the speaker against his fate, while the lamentation that “[his] life away wears” echoes the body’s “wasted flesh of colour dead” in “The flaming sighs” (7). Once again in this poem there is the acknowledgment of a “wound” whose “scar shall still remain” (7-8) as an eternal reminder of suffering, humiliation, and trauma, an image upon which, as we have seen, Wyatt seems to have dwelt constantly at this time. There are also the characteristic dark hints at treachery and injustice, as found in the line, “Malice assaulted that righteousness should save” (6), and the sadly resigned insistence of the speaker, “Innocency is all the hope I have” (4). As Christopher Z. Hobson notes, “‘Innocency is all the hope I have’ is not ‘misplaced’ among the

several lines referring to the poet's miserable circumstances, but rather is to be read as one of those circumstances, as a shocking, bitter statement on the powerlessness of truth: innocency is *all the hope I have*" (237, italics Hobson's).

It is the few, tantalizing details contained in this poem concerning the material realities of imprisonment, however, that give it some distinction from the other two prison poems I have analyzed. As Freeman explains, "Hygiene was primitive, at best, even in early modern palaces; in prisons it was truly appalling" (144), a fact that underlines the speaker's complaint that it is "Stink and close air" that is "wear[ing]" away his "life" and health in his cell (3). There is also mention of the "Clinking of fetters" (2), suggesting that the prisoner has not only been confined to a cell, but physically chained as well. At first this may seem a metaphorical flourish inserted merely for effect, since high-ranking prisoners often enjoyed considerable privileges and material comfort while imprisoned (Ahnert, *Rise* 17-18), but one must keep in mind that Wyatt was by no means a man of truly aristocratic lineage, and the gravity of his disgrace and the charges against him had already resulted in some especially rough treatment: Wyatt "was taken in chains to the Tower" after his arrest (Brigden 21), with his bound hands serving as a mark of particular humiliation and disfavour, while his property was seized and his servants dismissed – a truly ominous sign of the king's intentions towards him (Walker 342). The mention of "fetters", then, as surprising and unlikely a detail as it may at first appear, may perhaps have some basis in the actual conditions of Wyatt's 1541 imprisonment. Finally, in line 6, the speaker claims, "Rain, wind, or weather I judge by mine ears", which can be interpreted as yet another small but vivid detail of life within the Tower's walls. If so, then the days of gazing down from the "bell tower" and "learn[ing] out of a grate" what a blood-soaked political crisis looks like ("Who list his wealth", 16; 18) are well and truly over, suggesting that this time the prisoner has



been confined to a windowless cell, or cannot move freely over to where the window is due to his “fetters”. The image of the speaker straining to “judge by [his] ears” the conditions of the world outside suggests a situation of total isolation, a symbol of the gulf that now divides him from the court and society of which he was once a part. In light of these unhygienic, lonely and frightening conditions, the speaker’s decision to speak to his addressee by name in the penultimate line of the poem is particularly poignant: in attempting to talk to “Brian” through his writing, the speaker is once again trying to create an alternative space for himself within his prison, inviting his friend to listen to his testimony of his experiences and to thereby serve as a witness to – and, as we have seen previously, to “judge” (“The flaming sighs” 16) – the dangerous reality the prisoner is forced to face, and the injustice of his suffering. “Sighs are my food” thereby joins “Who list his wealth and ease retain” and “The flaming sighs” to form a memorable trio, one that sees Wyatt’s prison writing perform the dual functions of literary witness to the political crises and imprisonments Wyatt was swept up in under Henry VIII, and as testaments to the personal trauma resulting from such crises.

In 1541, history repeated itself: just as in 1536, Wyatt managed to make a near-miraculous escape from death. Although “a person indicted for treason in sixteenth-century England had only one chance in twenty-five of being acquitted” (Manning 109), Wyatt found himself unexpectedly on the slim side of those odds. Unfortunately, and no doubt to the disappointment of Wyatt scholars everywhere, it was not the power of the pen that set Wyatt free and returned him to Henry VIII’s service in the end:

What would eventually secure Wyatt’s pardon and release was neither the eloquence of his Declaration and the subsequent, longer Defence, nor the likelihood of his innocence, but that more familiar engine of Tudor justice, patronage. It was a well-judged

intervention on his behalf by Henry's new queen, Catherine Howard (perhaps prompted by her cousin, Wyatt's friend and fellow poet Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey) that persuaded the king to order his release. (Walker 345)

The traces of political witness, testimony, and trauma within the context of imprisonment are not, however, confined solely to the poems written within and about Wyatt's carceral experiences of 1536 and 1541. The crises set in motion by Henry VIII's increasingly tyrannical rule throughout the 1530s and 1540s had a significant impact upon the royal court at large, affecting even those rare courtiers who either never fell out of their king's favour, or who, like Wyatt, found themselves suddenly facing real danger only to be just as suddenly granted a reprieve. The spectre of arbitrary disgrace, imprisonment, and death stalked the Henrician court and the lives of those who devoted themselves to it, and what is perhaps most astonishing about Wyatt's verse is how persistently the imagery of imprisonment pervades even the poems he wrote as an ostensibly free man. It is to a small selection of those poems, and to what they can tell us about the encroachment of a culture of imprisonment at the Henrician court, that I now turn.

## II

Life as a royal courtier was never particularly easy, but with the advent of the royal supremacy in all matters spiritual and temporal under Henry VIII, the dangers began to multiply, leaving the most seemingly secure courtier in a precarious position. As Ahnert writes, "Those associated with the court of Henry VIII lived in an environment where a relationship with the wrong person, or words apparently spoken in confidence, could put them in danger of death" ("Inscribed" 146). In such a climate, the standard dichotomies of innocence and guilt, danger and

security, or even imprisonment and freedom cease to be stable, giving rise to a culture of imprisonment under the developing English absolute monarchy of Henry VIII. As W.B. Carnochan explains,

The prison theme is not encompassed by dungeons, debtors' prisons, penal colonies, internment camps, jails, or penitentiaries alone; such a list, though something of a practical necessity, overlooks the larger, metaphorical pattern that includes all manner of restraint on human action. The overarching category is confinement; its subcategories are captivity of any sort and the particular experience of imprisonment. Confinement restricts the free movement of body or mind. (427)

The oppressive political atmosphere of the Henrician court induced a sense of entrapment in those whose lives and social standings were intimately intertwined with it, and it is this metaphorical and psychological experience of confinement that Wyatt draws upon in his poetry, placing the imagery of imprisonment at the centre of his representations of the Henrician court. In Seth Lerer's words, it is the "thematized intrusiveness that makes Wyatt's work so complex and anxious and, in turn, that grants it a historical specificity in the invasive readings of Cromwellian surveillance in the later 1530s" (165). A close examination of "My mother's maids", "Like as the bird in the cage enclosed", and "In court to serve" provide a window into this haunting theme of imprisonment, speaking not only to the lingering effects upon Wyatt of his actual prison experiences, but also of the transformation of the Henrician court itself into a place that provides an unrelenting experience of physical and psychological entrapment.

"My mother's maids" (Rebholz 189-192), although based on a rather charming animal fable by Horace, is transformed in Wyatt's satirical adaptation into a dark political critique of the perils of life at the Henrician court, in which the courtier inevitably finds himself trapped by a

power he can neither effectively resist nor fully understand. This satire has the distinction of straddling the classifications between actual prison writing and Wyatt's non-carceral verse, since it was written during the spell of his enforced retreat to Allington Castle after his release from the Tower in 1536 (Walker 307). It is therefore a "prison poem" if we consider de facto house arrest as another one of Wyatt's prison experiences, but on the other hand, the context of the work's composition does represent a strange limbo, an in-between state between imprisonment and freedom that suffuses the satire with its ominous ambiguity. The framing of the poem is also a mixture, featuring three interlaced layers of narration. It is, firstly, a verse epistle from Wyatt to John Poyntz, which opens with the speaker remarking to his addressee, "My mother's maids when they did sew and spin / . . . sang sometime a song of the field mouse" (1-2). In these opening lines, the speaker automatically distances himself from the narrative, attributing the tale he has to tell to his "mother's maids", with the singing of these servants forming the second layer of narration. The third layer of narration is the fable of the country mouse and town mouse itself, since the song of the maids can be traced back to the classical world and another narrator, Horace. Greg Walker argues, "to base the poem in fable and the proverbial wisdom of working women (however genteel their acted 'labour') was also, paradoxically, to claim for it another form of authority, rooting it in the timeless folk-wisdom of the countryside and the rhythms of the labouring year" (308), but the tactic of layered narration is also, of course, a subtle distancing technique, providing a convenient smokescreen for Wyatt's political commentary. Colin Burrow notes that "indirect speech, allusive speech, speech received from folklore, was *safe* . . . [Wyatt's] physical survival depended on his ability to make his language appear to have nothing to do with him" (40). From the opening lines of the poem, then, this labyrinthine narrative

structure provides subtle clues to the reader that all is not what it seems, signalling that the fable the speaker recounts will also contain more than one layer of meaning.

In the fable itself, the country mouse, driven by starvation and hardship, attempts to join her more sophisticated urban sister in the town so that she too can “live a lady” (35), and the speaker’s description of the country mouse’s tense reception is riddled with hints of hidden danger and intrigue:

And to the door now is she come by stealth  
And with her foot anon she scrapeth full fast.  
Th’other for fear durst not well scarce appear,  
Of every noise so was the wretch aghast.  
At last she asked softly who was there.  
And in her language as well as she could  
‘Peep,’ quod the other, ‘sister, I am here.’  
‘Peace,’ quod the town mouse, ‘Why speakest thou so loud?’(36-43)

The country mouse’s approach, and her first dialogue with her sister, is ominous: even before the country mouse has gained any informed awareness of her new surroundings and the possible dangers they may contain, she still exhibits the behaviour of someone ill at ease, approaching her sister’s dwelling “by stealth” (36), and “with her foot . . . scrapeth full fast” (37) at the door, with the description of her scraping motion being made “full fast” suggesting haste, unease, and a desperation for swift admittance into the safety of the home. The sister’s first reaction to the noise is one of “fear” (38), initially preventing her from seeking out to know who is there, since “Of every noise was the wretch aghast” (39). The use of *wretch* to describe the town mouse is an interesting one, since the opening lines of the poem have been devoted to stressing how

desperate the country mouse's living conditions have been, which is what led her to dream of the apparent carefree existence her urban counterpart leads "at the rich man's cost" (23) – for the speaker to call the urban mouse a "wretch" thus suggests immediately that the urban mouse is also leading a difficult and precarious existence, despite all her creature comforts. The fear of the urban mouse continues to be emphasized in the way she ultimately summons enough courage to ask "*softly* who was there" (40); when her sister announces "I am here" (42), the urban mouse's first impulse is not to exclaim with joy, but to scold: "Peace . . . why speakest thou so loud?" (43). The urban mouse lives in apparent terror of attracting attention, of being overheard, which makes Burrow's observation that "Wyatt . . . is writing in the atmosphere created by the Treason Act" (40) a significant one, especially since, as this exchange demonstrates, Wyatt is not only writing this epistle *in* such an atmosphere but also *about* it. If deprivation and toil mark the life of the country mouse, then paranoia and terror are the hallmarks of the urban mouse's environment: a veiled commentary on the world of the courtier. The country mouse, far from having found a place of refuge, is walking into a terrible trap.

The reality of the dangers of this paranoid urban world becomes starkly clear within a handful of lines, ensuring that the country mouse's "joy" at being hosted and "feasted" (46) is decidedly short-lived: the sudden appearance of a predatory cat triggers a scene of chaos, but while the worldly town mouse flees, knowing "whither to go" (59), the humble town mouse meets a different fate:

At the threshold her silly foot did trip,  
And ere she might recover again  
The traitor cat caught her by the hip  
And made her there against her will remain. (64-67)

As Hobson writes, “the fate of the country mouse, whom we last see ‘caught . . . by the hipp’ and made to remain ‘against her will’ (66-67) suggests a scene of imprisonment” (242), later adding, “Even more telling is the reference to the cat as ‘traytour’ . . . the cat as king is a conventional identification in fable” (243). It is also worth considering the rather unsettling portrait of the hierarchy between the country mouse and the cat in these lines: as the reader has already learned, the mouse has walked innocently into her fate, having sought only a reprieve from starvation (Hobson 243), and she has not engaged in any particularly bold or risky behaviours during her urban sojourn either, having come to her sister’s door “by stealth” and doing nothing to deliberately attract the attention of the “cat” or anyone else. Her “trip” against the “threshold” (64) that seals her fate is simply a matter of bad luck. Most tellingly of all, however, is that the *cat* is the one described as a “traitor”. If, as Hobson suggests, we interpret the cat as a symbol for the king, then “traitor” carries with it some rather potent insinuations. By entrapping the mouse “against her will”, the speaker suggests that the “traitor” cat is behaving treacherously and maliciously, exerting dominance over an innocent and vulnerable being in a manner that is nothing but cruel.

The structure of the poem stresses the arbitrary and unsettling nature of the country mouse’s plight by breaking off the fable narration at this scene, leaving the mouse trapped by the cat instead of continuing on to the fable’s usual ending, in which the country mouse escapes and returns home to the country, “reconciled to her humble home” (Walker 309). The epistle’s speaker interjects and takes over the narration again in an apparent attempt to turn the fable into a homily: “Alas, my Poyntz, how men do seek the best / And find the worst by error as they stray!” (“My mother’s maids” 70-71). The speaker then goes on to elaborate upon the vices of greed and lust, praising resignation and devotion to “Virtue” (108) as the key to a peaceful life.

The problem, of course, is that the speaker's discourse does not make much sense in the context of the version of the fable he has recounted. By choosing to eliminate the country mouse's return to her rural retreat, the praise of a quiet life seems almost beside the point, evading as it does the fact that the mouse's imprisonment is unwarranted, and that the mouse herself has not betrayed any tendencies to the vices the speaker denounces: after all, the country mouse "goes to town because of starvation" (Hobson 243). It is the desire to survive, not greed, that forces her migration. Likewise, as noted above, her capture by the cat is not due to vice or blatantly risky conduct, but a mere slip of the foot. The telling of the fable and the speaker's commentary after it is thus disjointed. Tom Betteridge writes, "There is no moral to the story of the town and country mice, although the poem makes one feel that there ought to be. Instead Wyatt gives his reader a story that ends with an exercise of violent arbitrary power" (76), but such an assessment misses the point of the fable, and indeed, the epistle as a whole: "My mother's maids" offers not a moral lesson, but a criticism of the very "violent arbitrary power" it depicts. The blustering of the speaker at the poem's end against vice is, I would suggest, another technique Wyatt employs to thinly veil the message the poem conveys about Henry VIII and his court, in which getting caught in the snares of royal power is more often a stroke of ill-luck, a "trip", than it is a matter of morality and justice. Once again, the distance between the lessons proffered by literature and its commonplaces, as witnessed above in "Who list his wealth" and "The flaming sighs", is stressed in this satire as well, exposing the speaker's attempt to posit some sort of moral in the midst of an adaptation that clearly does not and cannot be reconciled with such trite moralizing as a false and misleading move. Such moral lessons, Wyatt suggests, are empty, and inapplicable to a royal court where the usual rules of morality and the typical relationship between cause-and-effect either do not apply or are grossly perverted. The world of fable and comforting folk-



wisdom has been replaced with a subtle allegory of the oppressive forces of royal power, and the paranoia and entrapment of the courtiers that live and serve within reach of the “traitor cat[’s]” claws.

In “Like as the bird in the cage enclosed” (Rebholz 125-126) – a poem Walker believes may have been “written during the dark days of 1536” (312) – this theme of entrapment in the clutches of a terrifying and unpredictable power is given perhaps its fullest and most vivid embodiment in all of Wyatt’s verse. The speaker of the poem seems caught in a situation that offers no satisfying way out, a dilemma represented as entrapment that comes in two different guises in the poem’s opening lines: “Like as the bird in the cage enclosed / The door unsparr’d and the hawk without / ’Twixt death and prison piteously oppress’d” (1-3). The metaphorical bird in the cage can leave its physical prison if it should so choose, since the door is “unsparr’d”, but a “hawk” awaits the bird “without”, offering certain “death” if the bird should attempt to leave. “Oppress’d” by such a pitiful condition, which is in itself reminiscent of the country mouse’s dilemma of having to choose either starvation or a perilous urban existence, the speaker lives in a state of suspension, wondering “Which should be best by determination / By loss of life liberty, or life by prison” (6-7). The speaker equates “liberty” with death, a final means of escaping his predicament once and for all, and this becomes a recurring motif throughout, with the speaker continuing to mull the possibility offered “By short death out of danger yet to be delivered / Rather than with painful life, thralldom, and dolour” (10-11). “Thralldom” again denotes entrapment, echoing the imagery of the cage in the opening lines and the “prison” of each stanza’s closing refrain, while the “painful life” filled with “dolour” contrasts once more with the “deliver[ance]” or “liberty” promised by death. The third stanza then introduces the vagaries of Fortune:

By length of life yet should I suffer,  
Awaiting time and Fortune's chance.

Many things happen within an hour:

That which me oppressed may me advance. (15-18)

Here we find echoes of the courtier's life, with the sudden inexplicable shifts into favour or disfavour that Wyatt himself knew first-hand. The speaker muses that if he continues to live like a bird in a cage, he will be at the mercy of "time and Fortune's chance", with "Fortune" conjuring up images of Fortune's Wheel, that well-loved trope in the literature of the Renaissance that depicted both good and bad fortune as matters entirely in the hands of fate, dooming humans to undergo an endless cycle alternating between suffering and reprieve. His remark that "Many things happen within an hour" could serve as a tidy, if unsettling, summary of life at the Henrician court in the service of a monarch whose whims and rages were always unpredictable. Finally, the speaker's admission that what has "oppressed" him may also lead him to "advance", can also be interpreted as a piece of political commentary, echoing as it does Wyatt's own experiences, throughout which the figure of Henry VIII played the role of either royal benefactor, bestowing titles, positions, and largesse upon his faithful servant, or persecutor, "oppress[ing]" that same servant with confiscation, imprisonment, and even the risk of a traitor's death. The poem ends with no clear resolution, with the speaker turning to an audience of supposed "lovers" for "advice" (25) – another one of Wyatt's distancing techniques, as it seems to occur almost as an afterthought in the poem to present the dilemma within the cloak of a courtly love lament – still inquiring whether the speaker should choose to be "In cage in thraldom, or by hawk to be oppressed?" (26). Again, at the poem's close we find not only the recurrence of the imprisonment imagery which opened the poem, with the "cage" and the

“hawk”, but also the same language in the words “thraldom” and “oppressed”. In a study of Charles Baudelaire, Kevin Newmark writes, “Traumatic poetry . . . suggests how the language we speak in order to understand the experience of trauma is also irretrievably marked by it” (254), a theory that seems to be borne out here within this poem: the obsessive repetition of imagery and language throughout the poem creates a circular reading experience, in which the speaker, and by extension his reader, is led around and around the same problem, the same arguments, as if the verse itself is becoming entrapped by constantly turning in upon itself, embodying in its form the imprisonment of which the speaker complains. The symptoms of trauma noted above in Wyatt’s prison poetry, with the speaker unable to break free of the intrusive images and memories that haunt him, finds a subtle echo in both the form and subject of this poem, and it is no accident, if Wyatt did indeed write it in 1536, that its main theme is life in a “cage”. Even outside of the material walls of the Tower, Wyatt suggests, imprisonment in another form still awaits the Henrician courtier.

On that note, it is only fitting to end my analysis with a brief look at “In court to serve” (Rebholz 102), in which Wyatt abandons his characteristically subtle approach to instead explicitly depict the Henrician court as a prison:

In court to serve, decked with fresh array,  
Of sugared meats feeling the sweet repast,  
The life in banquets and sundry kinds of play  
Amid the press of lordly looks to waste,  
Hath with it joined oft-times such bitter taste  
That whoso joys such kind of life to hold,  
In prison joys, fettered with chains of gold. (1-7)

Wyatt here removes the lines between freedom and imprisonment completely, conflating the life of the courtier with the life of the prisoner. The courtier, “Amid the press of lordly looks”, is condemned to “waste” (4), recalling the depiction in “The flaming sighs” of “The wasted flesh of colour dead” of the prisoner (7), or how the prisoner’s “life away wears” (3) in “Sighs are my food”. While the “Clinking” of material “fetters” greets the ears of the prisoner in the Tower (“Sighs are my food,” 2), the courtier is also chained, “fettered with chains of gold” in a court that is denounced as a “prison”. The speaker of “In court to serve” warns his reader that “The life in banquets / . . . Hath with it joined oft-times such bitter taste”, with the paradoxical shifts between the sweetness of the “banquets” and the “bitter taste” lying just beneath the surface of all those “sugared meats” finding its complement in the actual prisoner’s sarcastic comment of the “sweetness in gall” (“The flaming sighs”, 8). The “press” of “lordly looks” also speaks to the oppressive atmosphere of the Henrician court, with “press” yet another form of the “thraldom” the speaker struggles against in “Like as the bird in the cage enclosed” (11). Here at last, in the handful of lines that constitute “In court to serve”, Wyatt allows his speaker to remove the mask of the cunning, subtle wordsmith and instead sets forth a portrait of the Henrician court stripped of all the pretences the gilded appearance of “fresh array” and “banquets” would present to the unworldly observer, the kind of innocent country mouse in search of the good life “at the rich man’s cost” (“My mother’s maids”, 23). Life in royal service, Wyatt reveals, is nothing more than “prison” by another name. For a man like Wyatt, whose identity and social standing was entirely dependent upon faithful service to the Tudor monarchy, this presented an irresolvable dilemma: “Wyatt had understood . . . that rural retreat was no answer, and had seen no alternative but to serve a king whose service was not freedom” (Brigden 27). Taken together, this group of poems suggests that there is nothing a courtier can do but entrust himself to the

vicissitudes of fate, hoping that he will be one of the lucky ones who never “trips” (“My mother’s maids” 64). It is a bleak portrait of courtly life, one that presents the life of the political elite under Henry VIII as a culture of imprisonment that offers no real alternative: Wyatt, like everyone else, whether attending at court, retreating to Allington Castle, or confined to a cell in the Tower, is trapped.

In concluding this chapter, it is only fitting to return to the words of Dr. Edmund Bonner, who pretended not to understand why a man like Wyatt, “Wittie [as] he is, and pleasant amongs companye, contented to make and kepe chere” could fail to “forget his emprisonment” even at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor in Spain (Muir 68). Wyatt’s own remarks on his prison experiences in the *Defence*, coupled with the poetry written within and without the Tower’s walls, form a fitting and unequivocal response: when one is a courtier serving an absolute monarch like Henry VIII, the trauma of imprisonment can never be fully eradicated, as to pass from the court into the Tower, and back again, is to exchange one cage for another. The wound heals, but the scar remains.

### Chapter III

#### *As I Did Say, That is No Treason: Sir Thomas Wyatt's Defence and the Dangers of Language*

In a reign notorious for its incidents of marital scandal and violent political purges, the relatively quiet year of 1534 nevertheless deserves special recognition as a milestone for Henrician England. Henry VIII, faced with growing opposition to the political and religious revolution triggered by his break with the Roman Catholic Church, decided that the time had come to secure his newfound royal supremacy once and for all. The most effective way to combat all forms of dissent, Henry VIII and his political masterminds decided, lay in the creation and enforcement of a new law for treason. The 1534 Treasons Act was a revolutionary document, one that startled contemporaries both at home and abroad with its uncompromising severity. Its most draconian innovation was the introduction of “treason by words”, a clause in which speech and writing critical of the king was equated with taking *action* against the king:

[I]f any person or persons . . . do maliciously wish, will or desire by words or writing, or by craft imagine, invent, practise or attempt any bodily harm to be done or committed to the king's most royal person, the queen's, or their heir's apparent . . . or slanderously and maliciously publish and pronounce, by express writing or words, that the King our sovereign lord should be heretic, schismatic, tyrant, infidel or usurper of the crown . . . then every such person and persons so offending . . . shall have and suffer such pains of death and other penalties as is limited and accustomed in cases of high treason. (Elton 62-63)

Until the passing of the 1534 Act, English law had rested upon the 1352 treason statute of Edward III, in which “High treason . . . was to include only offences against the king's person and his regality” through such actions as inflicting bodily harm upon the royal family, forgery, or taking arms against the king (Bellamy 9). As Rebecca Lemon notes, the 1352 law also included

“imagining” the death of the king as treason, although “the use of the term ‘imagine’ initially functioned as a synonym for compass, meaning to plot or plan” (6). The sense of “imagine” as plotting is still used in the passage of the 1534 Act quoted above, since “wish[ing], will[ing] or desir[ing] by words” is grouped separately from “imagin[ing], invent[ing], practis[ing], or attemp[ing] any bodily harm”, suggesting that “imagine” falls into the latter category of constituting, or leading to, physical action instead of remaining confined to language alone. The 1534 Act, unlike Edward III’s 1352 law, is unequivocal and explicit in attempting to usher in words under the ever-widening umbrella of treason, and the nervous profusion of the Act’s own language hints at a desire to cover every conceivable angle of treasonable speech: the king must not be labelled a “heretic, schismatic, tyrant, infidel or usurper of the crown” on pain of death. John Bellamy claims, “This was very much a specific response to a specific problem. Such abusive descriptions were becoming daily more frequent all over the country” (32), and in light of measures so extreme, one can only imagine that subjects who had hitherto refrained from considering the king a “tyrant” now had reason enough to do so. Now even a few carelessly uttered words critical of the king and his policies could lead one directly to the gallows.

By its very nature, this new offence of “treason by words” could pose special problems for a courtier and poet like Sir Thomas Wyatt, although it would take seven years after the passing of the Treasons Act before he would become entangled in its snares. In the letter Dr. Edmund Bonner wrote to Cromwell, the most serious allegation by far was Bonner’s claim that Wyatt had spoken treasonously against the king during his embassy to Spain: angered by the king’s apparent coolness towards “the emperoures overtures”, Wyatt was said to have exclaimed, “By goddes bludde, ye shall see the kinge our maister cast out at the carts tail, and if he soo be serued, by godds body, he is well serued.” As if fearing Cromwell might miss the full

implications of such sentiments, Bonner adds, “And, as far as I remember . . . the woordes wer also with a moor bitter addition, it is to wit, ‘By godds bodie, I woold he might be soo serued, and then were he well serued” (Muir 67). Such words, as Bonner reported them, were virtually treason twice over: not only had Wyatt deeply insulted the royal dignity by speaking of the king getting “cast out at the carts tail” – which was, as we shall see, interpreted as alluding to the execution method reserved for common criminals – but had even gone so far as to express satisfaction at the thought of the king’s disgrace: “I woold he might be soo serued, and then were he well serued”. Bonner, ever crafty, protested to Cromwell that he alone had spoken up against Wyatt’s views, until “Mr. Wyat, perceyving that I spake very earnestlie . . . began to call hymself home and to speke of an other sorte, but angry surelie he is that his travaill bringeth furthe noo better issue” (Muir 67). Having managed to aim a blow against the man he had grown to dislike while presenting himself as a loyal royal champion, there was nothing for Bonner to do but wait for the poisonous seeds he had sown to yield results. In 1541, Bonner got his wish.

Faced with such accusations, Wyatt had no choice but to take up the issue of “treason by words” in both his initial *Declaration* and his subsequent *Defence*, but what makes Wyatt’s attempts to extricate himself so valuable are the insights they provide into Wyatt’s conceptions of, and relationship to, the dangers of language. As Brigden observes, “so elusive a poet, who chose to leave his readers uncertain, suspended between diverse meanings, and so subtle a diplomat . . . had his words twisted by his enemies” (29). The concern that is foremost again and again in Wyatt’s angry responses to the charge of high treason is how words can be weapons, cynically manipulated by others in the dangerous world of the Henrician court. In the *Declaration*, Wyatt insists, “God knowethe what restles tormente yt hathe byne to me . . . to examen my selffe, perusinge all my dedes to my remembraunce, *whereby a malicious enemye*



*myghte tayke aduantage by evell interpretation*” (Muir 180, italics mine), while protesting in the *Defence*, “ye shall easly perseave that . . . theie *lye and mysreporte* the tale, or els that I cane [not] speake Inglyshe” (Muir 198, italics mine). As Elizabeth Heale writes, “the *Defence* . . . demonstrates, not only Wyatt’s consummate skill with words, but also his extraordinary awareness of the slipperiness of words and the mobility of meaning” (17). Yet, the concerns raised and debated in the *Defence* regarding the multiplicity of meaning within language, the risks of betrayal, and the precariousness of truth, are also a persistent theme in Wyatt’s poetry, providing a bridge between the poetry and prose of this remarkable but ill-starred courtier. In this chapter, I will analyze these concerns by reading passages from the *Defence* alongside a selection of Wyatt’s poetry, exploring the ways in which Wyatt’s rhetorical strategies and preoccupations with the uses and misuses of words reflect the dangers presented by the 1534 Treasons Act in the world of the Henrician court.

Wyatt’s conviction or acquittal hinged mainly on the interpretation of his intemperate words against Henry VIII, reported by Bonner as, “By goddes bludde, ye shall see the kinge our maister cast out at the carts tail” (Muir 67), and it is to the various ways of interpreting this statement that Wyatt turns in the *Defence*. Wyatt begins by addressing the statement within the context of the 1534 Treasons Act:

[F]yrste lett vs handle the matter as tho I had so saide, except onlie that same ‘falcely, maliciouslye and traytourously’ with all. Were yt so I had saide the wordes, yet that remayneth vnproved; but tayke yt not that I graunt them for I meane not so, but onlye that I had so saide. Reherse here the lawe of wordes. Declare, my lords, I beseke you, the meaninge therof. This includyeth that wordes maliciouslie spoken or trayterously agaynste the kynges persone shuld be taken for treason. Yt is not mente, maisters, of

wordes which dyspyse the kyng lightly, or which are not all the most reverently spoken of hym. (Muir 196)

Wyatt's rhetorical strategy here is twofold: he plays with language, even while preparing to clarify and untangle the meaning of the supposedly treasonous statement about the king and the cart, while also invoking the law under which he has been accused, subtly undermining it by interrogating its purport and perimeters. Wyatt begins this passage with a hypothetical: he invites his judges to consider the statement "as tho I had so saide, except onlie that same 'falcely, maliciouslye and traytourously' with all". He then quickly offers a disclaimer, reminding them that it "remayneth vnproved" whether he even made such a remark in the first place. This is, Wyatt stresses, not a confession, but rather an exercise in linguistic analysis. He then shifts again, saying, "tayke yt not that I graunt them for I meane not so, but onlye that I had so saide", which cleverly manipulates the judges even further: even in this hypothetical scenario, we are not to assume that such a statement *is* automatically maliciously and traitorously spoken, only that it was "so saide". Wyatt then addresses the statement from a legal perspective, challenging the judges to "Reherse here the lawe of wordes" and consider its true "meaning". At the end of the passage, Wyatt exposes the underlying flaw of the law: when critical statements are made about the king, what does or does not define them as treason is *intention* (Walker 349). Such words must be "*maliciouslie* spoken or *trayterously* agaynste the kynges persone" to fit the definition of treason, but "wordes which dyspyse the kyng lightly", although falling somewhat short of "rever[ance]", cannot count. Through his own clever manipulation of words and semantics, Wyatt attempts to reframe the accusation in a way that provides him with at least two potential escape routes: one, that he never said any such thing – "that remayneth vnproved",

after all – and two, that even if he had made that statement, it cannot be proven that he said so maliciously, as stipulated by the law itself.

Having set out these terms, Wyatt then goes on to deconstruct the supposedly treasonous statement itself, all the while toying with the endless possibilities afforded by language and revealing the proud mastery of one who has devoted much of his life to the translation and composition of verse. Wyatt urges his judges to consider that,

yt is a smale thyng in alteringe of one syllable ether with penne or worde that may mayk in the conceavinge of the truthe myche matter or error. For in thys thyng 'I fear', or 'I truste', semethe but one smale syllable chaynged, and yet it maketh a great dyfferaunce, and may be of an herer wronge conceaved and worse reported, and yet worste of all altered by an examyner. Agayne 'fall owte' 'caste owte', or 'left owte' makethe dyfferaunce, yea and the settinge of the wordes one in an others place may mayke great dyfferaunce, tho the wordes were all one (Muir 197)

If this were not a document written by someone in the hopes of saving his life, one could almost consider it the earliest example of English literary criticism: here Wyatt casts further doubt onto the validity of Bonner's accusations by introducing the risk of words being "wronge conceaved", pointing out that there are many ways of making a statement, all of which may at first appear to mean one and the same thing until closely inspected. Greg Walker interprets this tactic as meaning that "Wyatt's case [in the *Defence*] was not that he had not said the things accused against him, but simply that they did not carry the implications that Bonner had inferred" (346). After all, had Wyatt remarked, "I fear the king will be left out of the cart's arse", his language would be blunt but certainly not treasonous, for the "fear" would suggest that Wyatt considers such an outcome undesirable, while the phrase "left out" instead of "cast out" would make his

use of the cart imagery far more innocuous than Bonner had insinuated: “by throwinge owte of a carts ars I shulde mene that vile deathe that is ordayned for wretchede theves . . . But ye know, maisters, yt is a comen proverbe, ‘I am lefte out of the cartes ars’, and yt is taken vpon packinge gere togyther for carriage. That that is evell taken heede to, or negligently, slyppes owte of the carte and is loste” (Muir 197-198). As Wyatt explains, the “left out” version of the cart statement would simply refer to his fears that Henry VIII was in danger of finding himself isolated on the international stage after the rapprochement between the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and Francis I of France (198). With one stroke, Wyatt has transformed the statement Bonner had reported as the dark mutterings of a malcontent into a statement of concern for Henry VIII and England’s interests. As Colin Burrow writes,

[Wyatt] claimed he had meant to express only the impeccably ambassadorial sentiment that Henry VIII was in danger of being left out of European negotiations. He doesn’t say ‘As my mother’s maids always used to say, your honour . . .’, but the habit of mind is the same: this is safe folklore, impersonal, undirected – with just the hint of a hit at a person in power. (40)

The tactics of circumspection, allusion, and coding that Wyatt hones to perfection within his verse are, as Burrow notes, on display here in the *Defence* as well, and the motivation behind such tactics is the same in the prose as it is in the poetry: to offer covert political critique from a safe space of ambiguity, and to deflect the efforts of those, like Bonner, whose interests lay in seizing upon such words in order to harm their author.

The dangers presented by both the multiplicity of meaning and those who would seek to distort words for their own advantage is the subject of Wyatt’s sonnet, “Each man me telleth”

(Rebholz 86). The sonnet opens with the speaker defending himself against the accusation that he is changeable, explaining his reasons for his behaviour thus:

Each man me telleth I change most my device,  
And on my faith me think it good reason  
To change purpose like after the season.  
For in every case to keep still one guise  
Is meet for them that would be taken wise;  
And I am not of such manner condition  
But treated after a diverse fashion,  
And thereupon my diverseness doth rise. (1-8)

The speaker claims that he has “good reason” (2) for “chang[ing] his device” (1) when and as the “season” (3) demands instead of “keep[ing] still one guise” (4), with the word “season” denoting the situation the speaker finds himself in at any one time, while also carrying connotations of changeability and flux, since the seasons themselves do change. The speaker then complains that since he is “treated after diverse fashion” (7) by others, he has no choice but to give way to the “diverseness” that “doth rise” (8) within him in response. At the sonnet’s *volta*, the speaker sets out the conditions necessary for him to “keep still one guise” (4):

But you that blame this diverseness most,  
Change you no more, but still after one rate  
Treat ye me well and keep ye in the same state;  
And while with me doth dwell this wearied ghost,  
My word nor I shall not be variable  
But always one, your own both firm and stable. (9-14)

The *volta* levels a charge of hypocrisy against the reader, the mysterious “you” (9) to whom the speaker suddenly addresses himself with the introduction of the second person pronoun. The only way it is possible for a man to remain firm and true, the speaker says, is for him to have a companion willing to show him consistency and loyalty in turn, thus leading both parties to the same constant “state” (11) conducive to mutual trust. The speaker urges his reader, “Treat ye me well” (11), promising that in return, “My word nor I shall not be variable / But always one, your own both firm and stable” (13-14) for as long as life endures. The speaker’s use of the phrase “My word nor I” in line 13 is especially interesting when seen through the lens of Wyatt’s *Defence*, since this sonnet is filled with a longing for both words and self to be in harmony, removing any need for dissimulation and circumspection. As the *Defence* reminds us, a life lived at the Henrician court and under the heavy hand of the 1534 Treasons Act meant a life of forever weighing one’s words whether in speech or in writing, a trait that evidently became second nature to Wyatt in the composition of his poetry. As Elizabeth Heale writes, “The Wyatt we detect through the sonnets is crafty and evasive, the professional diplomat whose skills as a negotiator of the king’s and his own business depended on a sense of the flexibility of meaning and the dangers of fixed positions,” skills which lead to the “creat[ion of] a network of echoes and repetitions within which meaning seems to circulate without any final meaning” (97). The defensive evasiveness in “Each man me telleth” can thus be interpreted as a cynical reflection of the treachery of life at the Henrician court, while the sestet reveals a genuine desire beneath the mask of worldly cunning to connect with others without need of guile or pretence. True friends, Wyatt suggests in this sonnet, are hard to come by at the Henrician court.

It comes as little surprise that Wyatt felt this way, considering that the case against him was built on the testimony of a fellow ambassador who seems to have been eager to destroy him.

Outraged by the accusations, Wyatt does not pass up a single opportunity to strike back at Bonner for his betrayal: his rebuttals are filled with bitter sarcasm, revealing a patent desire to do as much damage to Bonner's reputation as possible. At the beginning of the *Defence*, Wyatt denounces the "cunning" of the "tales" that "may bothe deceave you [the judges] and amase me yf god put not in your heades honeste wysdome to waye these thynges" (Muir 188), vowing to debunk the accusations as "falce, maliciously invented, craftylye dysguised, and worse sett forthe" (189). In both passages, there is an emphasis on the accusations as deliberate fabrications, as Wyatt labels them "tales" that will "deceave", mere nothings that were "invented" to harm him, while the adverbs "maliciously" and "craftylye" paint Bonner as a devious and untrustworthy man. Towards the end of his *Defence*, Wyatt addresses Bonner directly, sneering at Bonner's claims that he has lived a life of vice by indulging in some character assassination of his own:

Come on now, my lorde of Londone, what is my abhominable and viciouse livinge? . . .  
Dyd you euer see woman so myche as dyne or suppe at my table? None, but for your  
pleasure the woman that was in the gallie . . . But by cawse the gentell men toke pleasure  
to see you intertayne her . . . theie leked well your lokes, your carvinge to Madona, your  
drynkyng to her, and your playinge vnder the table . . . 'the lyttell fatt prest were a iollye  
morsell for the signora.' This was there tawlke. (206).

Threatened by all of the tall tales born of Bonner's "craftie malice" (206), Wyatt attempts to turn the tide by telling some tales of his own about his accuser: Bonner, by now the Bishop of London, is, according to Wyatt, hardly a model of priestly chastity and abstemious living, and if Bonner can betray the secrets of Wyatt's private conversations, then Wyatt intends to betray Bonner's embarrassing secrets in turn. The vivid picture Wyatt presents of Bonner dazzled by a

Spanish lady, making a fool of himself with his amorous glances, gallant toasts, and “playinge vnder the table”, is designed to discredit the man upon whom the state’s case against Wyatt rests. While Wyatt challenges Bonner to substantiate the accusations made about his own supposed vices, demanding, “Do ye know yt or have ye harde yt? . . . Yf ye knowe yt , tell yt here, with whome and when. Yf ye harde, who is your autor?”, he rests assured that there are many who can back up his stories about Bonner: “Aske Masone, aske Blage . . . Aske Wolfe that was my stuarde . . . Aske other whether I do lye” (206). Of course, Bonner’s original accusations regarding Wyatt’s alleged debaucheries with “nunnes” and “harlotts” in Spain (67) and Wyatt’s salacious counterattacks are highly irrelevant in regards to the actual treason case – it is not, after all, high treason to spend one’s time and money chasing after women. Yet such passages in the *Defence* are nevertheless valuable, since they starkly expose the intensely personal nature of Tudor state politics, reminding us that personal reputations were deadly serious business. If Wyatt can tell stories that will make Bonner look like a deceitful hypocrite, then the validity of Bonner’s testimony against Wyatt will be thrown into doubt. Wyatt’s rhetorical deployment of slanderous, lurid stories is not just an echo of squabbling between courtly rivals, but another essential way in which language can be manipulated to reframe the case against him.

Bonner is not the only one who faces Wyatt’s wrath in the burning rhetoric of the *Defence*: John Mason, who accompanied Wyatt to Spain and was, for a time, one of Wyatt’s trusted companions, is also challenged and punished for his perceived betrayal. Mason was accused of having acted as a messenger between Wyatt and Cardinal Pole, one of Henry VIII’s enemies, and early in the *Defence*, Wyatt confronts Mason as he will later confront Bonner, his language foreshadowing that of the passages quoted above:

Theie accuse Mason. Call forthe Mason, swere hym . . . Dothe Masone here accuse me?



or confessethe that I sente hym on a message? What word gave I vnto the, Mason? What message? I defye all familiaritie and fryndshype betwext vs – say thie worste. My accusors them selffes ar accused in this tale as well as I, yf this be treasone. (192)

As with Bonner, Wyatt uses the powerful rhetorical effect of addressing Mason directly: “What word gave I vnto the, Mason?”. As with his direct address to Bonner, this is a tactic that gives Wyatt’s language a sense of immediacy and confrontation, once more conflating the personal and political elements of the case. Wyatt’s declaration that he will “defye all familiaritie and fryndshype betwext” Mason and himself recalls the moral of “Each man me telleth”, in which the speaker can only maintain honest and friendly relations with someone who will “Treat . . . [him] well and keep . . . in the same state” (11). Finally, just as Wyatt will attempt to undermine Bonner by combating Bonner’s colourful tales of vice with his own, so too does Wyatt here try to destroy any advantages Mason might believe himself to enjoy over his former friend, reminding him, “My accusors them selffes ar accused in this tale as well as I, yf this be treasone” (Muir 192). The 1541 case against Wyatt is, like the 1536 crisis triggered by Anne Boleyn’s fall from royal favour, a trial that pits friends and enemies alike against one another in a struggle for dominance and survival. Here, in Wyatt’s words to Mason, lies the disintegration of personal bonds under the weight of political pressure – another casualty of a life lived and ruined in the service of Henry VIII.

In “Mistrustful minds be moved” (Rebholz 174), the preoccupation with betrayal and the treachery of others that runs throughout the entirety of the *Defence* is captured in miniature, condensing the same sorrow, the same determination, and the same prickly defensiveness into three short stanzas. The poem opens with a brief, vague acknowledgement of the predicament the speaker finds himself in:

Mistrustful minds be moved  
To have me in suspect.  
The truth it shall be proved  
Which time shall once detect. (1-4)

As is typical of Wyatt's poetry, there is a reluctance to give concrete details, with the speaker preferring instead to give vague hints about what or who is threatening him. The use of "Mistrustful minds" as a synecdoche for the elite Tudor men who will pass judgement upon him introduces a vaguely ominous note into the poem from the first line. The speaker's short, declarative statements, "The truth it shall be proved / Which time shall once detect" (3-4) conveys a sense of grim finality, as if the speaker, trusting in his own innocence, remains defiant although he is now "suspect" (2). The speaker continues to proclaim his faith in his inevitable exoneration in the second stanza:

Though falsehood go about  
Of crime me to accuse,  
At length I do not doubt  
But truth shall me excuse (5-8).

The second stanza mirrors the first, with the speaker admitting that he is "accus[ed]" of "crime" in the stanza's second line, just as the second line of the first stanza mentions that he is "suspect". "Truth" is again mentioned in the assertion that "truth shall me excuse" (8), just as it was claimed previously that "The truth it shall be proved" (3). There is also once again a sense of inevitability, of things eventually turning out right in the end, for the speaker says, "At length I do not doubt" (7), with "length" as a sense of measurement, a span, complementing the mention

of “time” eventually “detect[ing]” (4) the speaker’s innocence in the first stanza. The poem concludes with a chilling plea for vengeance:

Such sauce as they have served  
To me without desert,  
Even as they have deserved  
Thereof God send them part. (9-12)

Wyatt’s tendency to pay his enemies and treacherous friends back in kind is embodied in these lines, in which the speaker desires that those who have “served” him a “sauce” (1) that he did not deserve, will be sentenced to experience the same in turn by “God”, the ultimate judge.

“Mistrustful minds be moved” thus captures both the sense of living in a court plagued by suspicion and tension, while also giving Wyatt a space to stage a more satisfying and straightforward narrative of troubling events, one in which the “truth” will always overcome all obstacles and vindication is merely a matter of “time”.

As in the poetry, so too in the *Defence* does Wyatt claim to entrust himself to the power of truth and his own innocence to acquit him of the charge of high treason, and some of the most clever and moving passages in the text are found towards the close of the speech, in which Wyatt makes a few last direct attempts at securing the judges’ clemency. Having claimed that Bonner “thought rather to [de]fame [him] then sincerely to accuse [him]” (207), suggesting – rather implausibly – that perhaps his enemy had hoped only to lower Wyatt’s standing at court instead of deliberately exposing him to real danger, Wyatt presents two last arguments in his favour, the first of which reminds his judges of their duties to Henry VIII as the king’s representatives:

The confidens put in my affares is for you to acqyute me. And yt is an nawghtie fere yf any man have any suche, to thynke a queste dare not acqyute a man of treason when theire

thinke him clear; for yt were a fowle sclaundere to the kynges maieste. God be thanked, he is no tyrant. He woll no suche thynges agaynst mens consciens. He will but his lawes and his lawes with mercie. (208)

Here, as he prepares to end his *Defence* and leave himself to the mercy of the judges, Wyatt once more reframes the case in terms that are favourable to him: the judges, he insists, ought to “acquyte [him]”, and Wyatt’s masterstroke lies in suggesting that if the judges do *not* acquit him, then they are merely acting out of “fere”, and committing a “fowle sclaundere” against Henry VIII himself. “God be thanked, he is no tyrant,” Wyatt slyly adds, once more implying that if the judges dare to give way to “fere” and convict him, then they would be behaving as if they thought that Henry VIII were indeed tyrannical, incapable of applying his “lawes with mercie” – and this would be treasonous behaviour on the part of the judges, for after all, the 1534 Treasons Act clearly insists that no man should accuse Henry VIII of being a “tyrant”. As Susan Brigden remarks,

Like others of the classically educated at Henry VIII’s court, Wyatt thought on the nature of monarchy, and of tyranny, and he wrote about it despite the dangers. But there was always an ambivalence in him . . . When Wyatt insisted to his judges that his king, and theirs, was ‘no tyrant’ and did not ‘wrest the law’ . . . he needed to believe it was true.

(30)

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine how far Wyatt “needed to believe it was true” that Henry VIII was not truly a tyrant, but Brigden’s nod towards his “ambivalence” is a shrewd observation. After all, there is much in Wyatt’s verse that struggles against the pressures of monarchical power, and even in the *Defence*, Wyatt freely admits that he has openly voiced misgivings about absolute monarchy: “I suppose I have not myssayde in that; for all powers

namlye absolute are so[re] roodes when they fall into evell mens handes, and yet I say theie are to be obeied by expres lawe of good” (Muir 205). But one must not forget that Wyatt’s entire life, as his father’s had been before him, was based on service to the Tudor dynasty, and no doubt the possibility that such faithful service might be repaid with disgrace and execution must have been unbearable to contemplate. Either way, Wyatt’s final rhetorical flourish in the *Defence* lies in the pressure he places on the judges to prove that the king is not a tyrant by acquitting him, and such a challenge is a bold one to make. Wyatt ends the *Defence* with an appeal to God as the supreme judge of all men, just as he does in the final line of “Mistrustful minds be moved”, declaring, “afore god and all these men I charge you with my innocente truthe that incase, as God defende, ye be gyltie of myne innocent bloude, that ye before his tribunal shalbe inexcusable” (209). It is a strong and brilliant finish, which once again reframes the case and turns the tables against those who appear to hold power over him: Wyatt, the accused here on earth, warns his judges that they themselves will be placed on divine trial – “before [God’s] tribunal” – and condemned without mercy if they are “gyltie of [his] innocent bloude”. Innocence and truth, Wyatt declares, will triumph in the end, even if it will take the intervention of God Himself in the afterlife to finally settle the score.

The precarious position of innocence and truth in the midst of the dangers and corruptions of the Henrician court is the subject of “What vaileth truth?” (Rebholz 72-73), a poem that meditates on the injustice of the courtier’s life in matters of both love and state:

What vaileth truth or by it to take pain,  
To strive by steadfastness for to attain  
To be just and true and flee from doubleness,  
Sithens all alike, where ruleth craftiness,

Rewarded is both false and plain? (1-5)

The dichotomies of truth and falsehood, steadfastness and changeability, are here undermined in the treacherous world of the speaker, where to be honest, loyal, and “just and true” is an exercise in futility. Since “craftiness” is what “ruleth”, then both “false and pain” are “Rewarded” indiscriminately, as advancement is more a matter of strategy and guile than merit, as the speaker soon explains: “Soonest he speedeth that most can feign / True meaning heart is had in disdain” (6-7). The dangers of trusting others, of speaking and acting without dissimulation, are acknowledged in the following lines: “Deceived is he by crafty train / That meaneth no guile and doth remain / Within the trap without redress” (10-12). Although the honest man “meaneth no guile”, his integrity is easily outmanoeuvred by the “crafty train” of those less scrupulous individuals who will not hesitate to take advantage of him, leaving him “Within the trap without redress”, with the mention of a “trap” introducing imprisonment imagery into the poem. The problems of slippery language and behaviour, marked by the “feign[ing]” of the most unscrupulous, are embodied in the language of the poem itself, with its query, “What vailleth truth?” embodying two double meanings itself through two possible homophones: “vailleth” and “veileth”, and “truth” and “troth”. In the former, we can read the line as insinuating “What *veileth* truth?”, as if the speaker is daring to ask what, or who, at the Henrician court is making it impossible to speak plainly of what the realities of life under Henry VIII’s reign are. In the latter, we can read the line as “What vailleth *troth*?”, calling into question the value of pledging one’s word in a world in which promises and pledges mean very little, if anything at all. Both readings go to the very heart of one of the linguistic paradoxes of Henry VIII’s rule: after all, Henry was a monarch deeply preoccupied with monitoring the speech of his subjects both through their taking of the Oath of Supremacy and through his relentless policing afterwards of the opinions they

dared to express regarding his rule and the state of England, which resulted in the meaning of words having tremendous importance in one sense while emptying words of all meaning in another. In the context of the Oath, Henry VIII seems to have believed that in enforcing outward conformity through the act of subjects publicly pledging their “troth” to his new Supremacy and heirs, he would ensure their obedience. Yet, the result of the 1534 Treasons Act was the opening of a Pandora’s box in which words – as in the case of Wyatt – could become so opportunistically twisted and so senselessly misinterpreted that what one really said and what one really meant hardly mattered: the king, paranoid and volatile, would find any pretence that suited him in order to bring an innocent man to trial. Thus, the poem’s speaker, like Wyatt in 1541, is forced to confront a world in which words are twisted, friendships feigned, and dangers endured in a way that does not follow satisfying patterns of morality or justice: “while truth might possess tangible power in some other mode of existence – in the afterlife perhaps, or the secret heart, or the all-seeing justice of God – in the world of Henry VIII and his fellow monarchs, in which Wyatt and other humanists moved, truth appears to be of no importance at all” (Gleckman 34). Against this backdrop, the poem’s plaintive refrain of “What vailleth truth?” (1, 9, 15) is also a rhetorical question posed in the knowledge that there can be no comforting answer, no real resolution. In the Henrician court, the courtier has no choice but to navigate the pitfalls of power in the knowledge that danger and misfortune are always a mere step away.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, it was not truth, but the intervention of other sympathetic, powerful people that secured Wyatt’s release from the Tower in 1541 (Walker 345), although both Catherine Howard and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey would ultimately face charges of treason themselves, with both cases ending in death. Restored to favour and royal service, Wyatt did not live long after his release, dying in October of the following year. At first

glance, it is not, perhaps, the most satisfying ending, since neither the subtle critiques offered in the poems, nor the proud defiance of the *Defence*, did anything to seriously challenge and break the tyrannical course of Henry VIII's reign. Yet Wyatt did manage to successfully weather every storm of a pitiless reign filled with upheavals and rapid change, repeatedly overcoming even the most dangerous of misfortunes. Wyatt may have returned to royal service after his last imprisonment an even more embittered, disillusioned man than the courtier who had emerged traumatized and dazed from the "bloody days" of 1536, but it cannot be denied that he was one of the most remarkable and tenacious survivors of Henry VIII's reign. He died of a fever caught while performing another diplomatic errand for the king, and one can imagine that, for all his ambivalence, for all his cynicism, this was a fitting end for Sir Thomas Wyatt, the lifelong courtier and ambassador of the king. As for the other side of Wyatt, the ambivalent, questioning poet and critic of the political world he lived in and served, it found its lasting embodiment in his poetry and prose, with both the *Defence* and his verse testifying to the dangers of language and the costs of living under the 1534 Treasons Act. The truth did not always triumph in the world of the Henrician court, but in the life and work of Wyatt, it managed to endure.



## Chapter IV

### *Conclusion: The Birth of Literary Witness*

Treason would continue to haunt the lives of the political elite long after Henry VIII's death, and it is perhaps worth recording the fate of the infamous 1534 Treasons Act. In 1547, upon the accession of Edward VI, the contested "treason by words" law was revoked. The First Treasons Act of Edward VI admits that Henry VIII and his Parliament,

did make and enact certain laws and statutes which might seem and appear to men of exterior realms and many of the King's Majesty's subjects very strait, sore, extreme and terrible, although they were then when they were made not without great consideration and policy moved and established, and for the time to the avoidance of further inconvenience very expedient and necessary. (Elton 64)

The First Treasons Act walks a careful line between admitting that the treason laws under Henry VIII were so "very strait, sore, extreme, and terrible" that they provoked criticism from both domestic and international quarters, and attempting to avoid disrespecting the reputation and memory of Henry VIII himself, who is hastily vindicated because he acted as he did only to avoid "further inconvenience". Edward VI, the Act goes on to explain, desires instead to inspire "more love and kindness" in his subjects through acting with "great indulgency and clemency" towards them, and is therefore "contented and pleased that the severity of certain laws . . . be mitigated and remitted" (64-65). Actions, and not words, again formed the basis of high treason. It was not to last: the "treason by words" law was reinstated and even expanded during the reign of Elizabeth I (Lemon 9). Absolute monarchs, it seems, often instinctively feared the power of the word and the pen.

There has been some debate amongst historians, however, as to whether such measures only appear harsh by twentieth- and twenty-first century standards. Sir Geoffrey Elton, the

preeminent Tudor historian of the twentieth-century, championed a view of the Henrician revolution as laying the foundations for modern Britain's commitment to legality and limited monarchy, but this view, dominant until relatively recently, has since been challenged, with the full extent of the abuses committed under Henry VIII receiving growing attention from scholars. As C.S.L. Davies explains, Elton's arguments that "the extension of the doctrines of treason was justified" ignores the reality that "the wholesale extension of attainder or procedures in the thirties . . . made a mockery of any legal process and showed parliament to be the instrument of the royal will. Professor Hurstfield's<sup>2</sup> argument that due process is not incompatible with tyranny is surely correct . . . it is difficult not to see Henry's instincts as basically tyrannical" (194). G.W. Bernard, in a recent essay, has also lent his support to this view, reminding us, "It would be impossible to compile a similar catalogue of executed queens, noblemen and councillors for any other reign: and it is important to emphasize that none of these convicted and attainted traitors had actually raised their swords against the king" (13). The Henrician treason laws, then, especially the "treason by words" clause, cannot and should not be seen as a mere quirk or misstep in the long march towards modern monarchy. The laws were, instead, a deliberate and rather chilling means to silence or remove those deemed inconvenient or vaguely threatening to the king's will.

The real consequences these laws had for the king's subjects, particularly those who served him as courtiers, is what we find in Sir Thomas Wyatt's life and work. Although primarily honoured posthumously as one of the founding fathers of English poetry for his Petrarchan adaptations and subtle lyrics, Wyatt's prison writing remains one of his most important literary legacies. As Rivkah Zim writes, "All prison writing bears witness to

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<sup>2</sup> Davies cites Hurstfield's book *Freedom, Corruption, and Government in Elizabethan England* (1973).

someone's story and experience, with wider political significance if it offers testimony to resistance against tyranny or injustice and suffering, for a public moral purpose" (306). In his poetry and throughout the *Defence*, Wyatt's writing questions the dictates and abuses of power, offering testimony to the darker side of Henry VIII's political revolution towards absolute monarchy through recounting his own personal experiences of imprisonment and treason. Wyatt, it should be remembered, was not a political or religious dissident in the vein of Henry Howard or Sir Thomas More. He had embraced Protestantism and the break with the Roman Catholic Church, which left him generally well-aligned with Henry VIII's religious policies, and his life as a courtier, as demonstrated throughout the course of this paper, was so closely intertwined with the Henrician court and service to the king that to stand apart from the system of political power would entail the renunciation of the very core of his identity. Yet, as the *Defence* and the poetry remind us again and again, Wyatt could not help but confront and question the Henrician state in his work, and even though he can neither find nor offer any real alternative to the system he recognizes as corrupt and dangerous, he nevertheless dares to observe, question, record, and testify to its horrors. Although prison literature would, as mentioned in my introduction, become of central importance throughout the sixteenth-century, many of Henry VIII's victims left no record of their prison experiences: Anne Boleyn, for example, left no poetry for posterity, while a prisoner like Lord Thomas Howard busied himself during his imprisonment with composing love poetry for the young bride he was separated from. It is Wyatt who, through the stark testaments of "Who list his wealth and ease retain" and "Sighs are my food", or in page after page of the *Defence*, dares to speak of the subjective effects Henry VIII's abuses have had upon him, providing a window into a world often distorted by triumphant royalist propaganda and obscured by the passing of time. Wyatt's prison writing is at the dawn of a new strand in English

literature, one that will see prison writing develop throughout the subsequent reigns of Tudor and Stuart monarchs into a genre that enables prisoners to tell their own side of the story: it is the birth of prison writing as a form of private testimony and literary witness, a legacy that remains with us to this day.

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