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Wyatt's Pessimism

Wyatt imitated Petrarch's sonnets and thus created his own versions of what it means to be a sonnet, but in doing so, Wyatt also changed the meaning of Petrarch's sonnets. Both Petrarch and Wyatt were obsessed over their respective loves. For Petrarch, it was the unattainable woman Laura, and for Wyatt, it was Anne Boleyn, one of Henry VIII's mistresses. However, both poets took the situation much differently. Wyatt was a pessimist when it came to his dealings with Boleyn, while Petrarch was more of an optimist in his pursuit for Laura.

Wyatt's XIX and Petrarch's #189, a poem about essentially the same thing, is an example of how Wyatt reacts differently from Petrarch. Before even examining the structure of the poems, there are many lexical differences between the two poems. Right at the beginning, Wyatt uses the phrase “galley charged with forgetfulness” (310) instead of Petrarch's “ship laden with forgetfulness” (52). The word “charged” has a negative connotation and gives the impression that Wyatt's galley is aimlessly wandering the sea. Petrarch's ship, on the other hand, is merely loaded with forgetful and drifting in the sea. Wyatt also dramatizes the scene as “winter nights” (310) rather than what Petrarch states as “midnight in winter” (52). The use of a singular word rather than a plural one gives the impression that Petrarch is trying to simply portray what is happening whereas Wyatt wants the reader to experience the events that are happening and have the reader feel his misfortune for multiple nights. Petrarch, who merely describes the situation as one night, hopes it will be over. In addition, Petrarch refers to Wyatt's “rock and rock” (310) specifically as “Scylla and Charybdis” (52). Scylla and Charybdis are two female water monsters from Greek antiquities. Petrarch uses euphemism here to soften his description of the

barriers at sea. To Petrarch, Scylla and Charybdis can be solved, just as they were solved in the Odyssey. Wyatt, on the other hand, gives a very tangible representation of the barriers as a pair of unmoving rocks. Finally at the end of the stanza, Wyatt describes his enemy as steering the ship, whereas Petrarch simply describes the captain as sitting. The differences here show that Wyatt is much more agitated by the situation and thus exaggerates his feelings. Petrarch is much more calm about it and describes his situation with rhetoric that gives a sense of optimism.

Wyatt's galley represents his own failure in wooing Boleyn, his lover. This parallels Petrarch's ship and his quest for the unattainable Laura. The "lord" that pilots both Wyatt and Petrarch's ship is the emotion with regard to both of their goals in acquiring their respective women. Wyatt, however, describes his emotions much more emphatically rather than the setting. In the second stanza of Petrarch's original sonnet, each oar that he describes "seems to scorn the tempest" (52). Wyatt uses the phrase "death were light in such a case" (310) instead. Scorn is definitely far from death and is merely a feeling of contempt towards something. Death, on the other hand, is an extremely pessimistic view to take with a ship fighting a storm. Although the tempest can be a physical storm, it can also symbolize Petrarch's mind, which is in disarray over what he should do about Laura. Wyatt's storm, likewise, is his interpretation of his situation with Boleyn. Being the pessimist that he is, he chooses to dramatize the experience to death. In addition, Wyatt describes a wind that will "tear the sail apace" (310). This is much more pessimistic than Petrarch who simply uses the more passive word "break" to describe what happens to his sails. Petrarch describes what will ultimately break the sails is a "changeless wind of sighs, hopes, and desires" (52). The changeless wind Petrarch refers to his dedication in pursuing Laura. He knows it may break his sail, but his optimistic hopes are still there. In Wyatt's translation, he does not even reference hope, rather claims it to be "forceful sighs and

trustful fearfulness” (310). The words forceful and fearfulness combine to give the pessimistic impression that Wyatt's emotions are cornered in despair.

In the third stanza, Petrarch uses the weather conditions as a vehicle for expressing his feelings. He describes his situation as a “rain of weeping, [and] a mist of disdain” (52). To weep is to shed tears in relatively small amounts. In addition, a mist is fog that usually clears up after a several hours. Petrarch is hopeful that things will be better. Wyatt explains his situation as a “rain of tears, [and] a cloud of dark disdain” (310). The tears that rain down come from dark clouds, most likely thunderclouds, which persist for days. Wyatt clearly sees a no quick end to this storm. And although both Petrarch and Wyatt write about the effects this storm has on the ship, Petrarch describes his ship with weary “ropes” (52) instead of “cords” (310). Cords are often times smaller and much weaker than full ropes. The ropes and cords not only describe the literal strength of the ship, but the strength of their resolve towards wooing their respective women. Petrarch's rope holds a much stronger hope that he will successfully resolve his situation. Wyatt's cord is liable to break and plunge him deeper into despair. Both of them agree that their ignorance may end up hurting them, but Petrarch is much more optimistic about the situation than Wyatt is.

In the final stanza, both of them begin to wakeup from their amorous dreams. However, Petrarch continues to stay hopeful on his ship. He makes reference to “sweet stars” (52) rather than just “stars.” Wyatt also adds that the stars “led [him] to this pain” (310) whereas Petrarch makes no explicit reference to pain. Petrarch does make references to the death of “reason and skill,” but the reason and skill he refers to is merely his realization that perhaps Laura truly is unreachable. Wyatt refers to his “reason” as drowning, rather than just simply dying. Drowning is a much slower and painful death, than simply dying. Wyatt emphasized his dying struggle,

which merely demonstrated his pessimism even more. Another key difference is in the final line of the sonnet. Petrarch claims that he “begins to despair of the port” (52), while Wyatt “remains despairing of the port” (310). This proves that Wyatt has been pessimistic the whole time and he remains in despair. It is only now that Petrarch begins to possibly feel the pessimism that Wyatt is feeling, and even then he is still unsure. The port can represent the literal destination of a ship, but is also a metaphor for the final destination of Wyatt and Petrarch's feelings. Perhaps Petrarch does become less optimistic at the end of the sonnet, but it is clear that Wyatt was very pessimistic to begin and remained that way throughout the sonnet. Even though they both have the same goal in mind, to woo a woman, they end up taking very different perspectives on it.