

On the Wheel Falling: Fortune in Wyatt's Poems

KUSUNOKI Yoshiko

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The treatment of the beloved in courtly love lyrics is often read as an aspect or embodiment of the female personification of Fortune, who rarely raises up the lover on her wheel to approach his beloved. Thomas Wyatt depicts the nature of both the beloved and Fortune in “Synce loue wyll nedes that I shall loue”:

For since my hart is bound to serue,
And I not ruler of mine owne,
What so befall, tyll that I sterue,
By prooffe full well it shall be knowne:
That I shall still my selfe apply
To serue and suffer patiently.

.....

Yea, though fortune her pleasant face,
Should shew, to set me vp a loft:
And streight, my wealth for to deface,
Should writhe away, as she doth oft:
Yet would I styll my self apply
To serue and suffer patiently. (CCLIII 13-18, 25-30)¹

¹ All quotations from Wyatt's poems are taken from *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1969), eds. Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson (hereafter cited by poem-number and line number in the text).

Despite the beloved's vague figure, she and Fortune are identical as an object, and also a frustrater, of his love. Here, Wyatt describes the lady's nature as an aspect of Fortune, the conventional emblem of fickle femininity, and vice versa. The court lady's indifference and the cruelty of Fortune are thus often interchangeable. Both are out of the lover's reach but extremely influential.

The figure of Fortune has a history. The main image of it is that Fortune is a goddess turning around her wheel endlessly. Fortune controls the destiny of those who are revolving on it. The figure of Fortune, which originally took on a neutral character of "bringer" and "taker," transformed through its long tradition.² And then in the time of Boethius, her feature had become just as what Philosophy in *The Consolation of Philosophy* explains "by using Fortune's own arguments":

Inconstancy is my very essence; it is the game I never cease to play as I turn my wheel in its every changing circle, filled with joy as I bring the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top. Yes, rise up on my wheel if you like, but don't count it an injury when by the same token you begin to fall, as the rules of the game will require. (Boethius II, pr. ii, 30-35)

Fortune is supposed to be a bringer of both good and evil, "to set [the lover] vp a loft / And streight, [his] wealth for to deface" (26-27), but the figure we observe in Wyatt's poems is ambiguous. There, a lover either pathetically complains of her changeability, or else dreamingly praises her for his past cherishing of those days spent close to her, all the while disguising his anger toward her by appearing piteous. What Wyatt's Fortune now brings seems to be only evil.

In this paper, I would like to observe how Wyatt incarnates his Fortune in his courtly love poems. For Wyatt, Fortune does not symbolise merely the capricious actions of chance in the world. Rather it suggests more immediate and mundane factors; the monarch, Henry VIII, and the court ladies with high status at Tudor court who control his destiny in the sexual and political service of the royal court. The dreamlike imagery of the Fortune described in "They fle from

² Howard R. Patch offers a detailed description of the tradition of Fortune in *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature* (New York: Octagon, 1967).

me that sometyme did me seke” would closely be looked at in the light of the contemporary social situation. In doing so, Wyatt's struggle against the looming threat of ladies and attitude in his life at court would become clearer.

I. A New Phenomenon in Tudor Court

In the Tudor period, the growing social influence of women came to challenge male power. Despite the endemic restrictions created by a predominantly patriarchal society, aristocratic women could wield certain kinds of power in society, especially in the field of familial politics, supporting other family members or acting independently to preserve and promote the fortunes of their houses.³ Tudor court ladies, in particular, were increasingly the intellectual equals of male courtiers and were able to participate in social, cultural, and economic areas of court life.⁴ However, society did not encourage women to seek power; and overt demonstrations of female authority were not publicly approved. Thus, although aristocratic women of the early sixteenth century were often educated to an impressive extent, there was no obvious place for them to put the skills and learning they acquired into practical use. Indeed, there is some evidence that influential men considered the increasing power of women a “threat” to their own hegemony, a threat against which they jealously defended themselves.⁵

In courtly love lyrics, the conventional relationship between a lover and his beloved remains constant. What is inevitable and implicit in the love relationship described therein is an absolute order between master-mistress and male servant. This is one of the traditions of courtly love in which the lover reveres his ideal lady and, rather forbearingly, pursues pure love. The rise of women at court, however, surely triggered Wyatt's poetic confusion. The ladies that Wyatt describes in his poems appear to be more powerful and sexually dominate the lover-narrator, and

³ For aristocratic women's roles in the family and male members' dependency on them, see Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), pp. 8-9.

⁴ Harris gives a full explanation in *English Aristocratic Women*, pp. 210-40. For court ladies' education, also see *ibid.*, pp. 37-39.

⁵ See, for example, Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 252; Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (London: Cornell UP, 1990), p. 309.

Wyatt deploys them as objects of men's desire.

In his well-known lyric, "They fle from me that sometyne did me seke," Wyatt describes the lover's disapproval of ladies' changeableness in an indignant manner, disturbed by the sudden reversal of their situations.

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

Thancked be fortune, it hath ben othrewise
 Twenty tymes better; but ons in speciall
 In thyn arraye after a pleasaunt gyse
 When her lose gowne from her shoulders did fall,
 And she me caught in her armes long and small;
 Therewithall swetely did my kysse,
 And softly said 'dere hert, how like you this?'

It was no dreame: I lay brode waking.
 But all is torned thorough my gentilnes
 Into a straunge fasshion of forsaking;
 And I have leve to goo of her goodeness,
 And she also to vse new fangilnes.
 But syns that I so kyndely ame serued,
 I would fain knowe what she hath deserued. (XXXVII 1-21)

Being entangled in the play of "fortune" (8), he appears to be baffled, observing that "they" (1) have first come to assuage their hunger with food from his hand, and then, for whatever reason, gone on to lose interest in him. For the similar situation of love relations, Andreas Capellanus states in *The Art of Courtly Love*:

"Even though you have given a woman innumerable presents, [...] she will treat you like a perfect stranger [...]" (48). Whereas this represents a normative behavior of a lady in courtly love, "they" in Wyatt's poem show the lady's powerful actions against Wyatt's lover. Owing to the capricious action of "fortune," he was once longed for, but has now come to be, rather wildly, dismissed by "them." Thus being forsaken, the lover says, in an ingratiating and rather ironical tone, that he is allowed to leave for her "goodeness" (18).

In the second stanza, the lover ecstatically recalls the sight of a lady who once held him "in her armes long and small" (12). At the same time her provocative challenge "how like you this?" (14) suggests sexual experience as well as the capacity to command. Here, a virtual master-servant relationship is employed by Wyatt, following the conventional idealisation of the ladies, whilst he pursues an unconventional eroticism. The ecstasy in which Wyatt's lover in "They fle from me" is absorbed apparently differs from that sought by the more traditional courtly lovers who were, as Kelly-Gadol spells out, "like the religious," in pursuit of "a higher emotional state than ordinary life provided," and far removed from "the daily, the customary, the routine" (180). In the courtly verse of Wyatt, Elizabeth Heale points out, we find that the "wanton, sexually active woman" is no longer a "country maid" but a court lady herself (76). This was a new phenomenon which pervaded the Tudor court; and the political conditions of the Tudor period might partly explain why the ladies behaved in the wanton manner of which they have been so severely accused. Gaining influence in society could have encouraged them to pursue a greater power more obviously for their own sake, that is, their own sexual power. Referring to Castiglione's advice for court ladies in *The Book of the Courtier*, Merry E. Wiesner explains that

Though Castiglione emphasized the importance for court ladies of both chastity and the reputation for chastity, at many courts young women quickly learned that sexual favors were one of their most powerful tools, and the women who achieved the most personal and familial power were often royal mistresses. (138)

Thus the new circumstances surrounding the ladies' wielding of sexual power

could have been closely linked with political affairs. If so, the fickle nature of the ladies would not be explained away as a wholly psychological matter; but at least in part, it should be considered to have been politically motivated. Also, attributing a fickle nature to court ladies and even accusing them of it was a means to stop, or at least relieve a nuisance in the politically confused Tudor court. The fall of Anne Boleyn is probably a salient example. Anne Boleyn was a well educated, ambitious lady, who won Henry VIII's great favour and became the queen of the king. Later she was accused of adultery with several courtiers, including Wyatt, probably by her political enemies, although there seems to have been little hard evidence for the charges against her. Anne and the accused courtiers were executed in 1536 although Wyatt survived and he was exiled from the court.⁶ Thus, having encountered this new phenomenon, male courtiers demonstrated their anxiety over such dominant court ladies by dipping their pen in vitriol, and in so doing they implied resistance to the success of such ladies and to their uncontrollable progress.

The phrase that the "lose" gown of the lady's did "fall" from her shoulders (11) is figurative for the new-type court lady; and her "armes" (12) are a reminder of the characteristic of Fortune. The images of Fortune's hands are distinctive: "With domineering hand she moves the turning wheel" (Boethius II, m. i, 1). They are alleged to be multiple in order to take away what she has brought. In *Fall of Princes* by John Lydgate, originally *Boccaccio's De Casibus*, "An hundred handis she hadde on ech part / In sondri wise hir giftes to depart" (VI, 34-35). Her long and small arms can also be explained as the same instrument of the taker although the description "long and small" is, so far at least, only visually supported in some illustrations of Fortune.⁷ What is more, the court lady's voice in "They fle from me": "dere hert, how like you this?" (14), which we have already heard, sounds

⁶ For more about Anne's influence at the court of Henry VIII and her alleged treason, see, for example, Carolly Erickson, *Mistress Anne* (NY: Summit Books, 1987), pp. 144-74, 246-49; also see Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, pp. 36-37, 221-23.

⁷ Tamotsu Kurose pointed out one of the themes of Fortune, "long and small" arms, in his *Unmei no Megami* [The Goddess Fortune] (Tokyo: Nan'un-do, 1970), p. 41, 93. He makes reference to the illustration, "Boethius and Fortune" also carried in Patch, whilst some other pictures in Kurose's *Miniatures of Goddess Fortune* seem to show clear images of Fortune's "long and small" arms as well.

seductive, and disturbing. The absence of the lady's voice in most of Wyatt's other poems casts her speech here into stark relief. As women were socially not allowed to speak as freely as men (and even a male courtier's speech was severely restrained by powerful social and political protocols during this period), and given also that to speak too much was considered to undermine women's grace and chastity, women in poems rarely say a word and frequently hide themselves from the reader's sight. In "They fle from me," however, totally contrary to the notion of female chastity, the less the lady says the more the poem takes on sexual hues, and the clearer her image appears in the lover's mind. Meanwhile Wyatt's lover-narrator has lost his presence to "them" and the readers.

Such conventional ideas as the correlation between women's silence and chastity conceal wide social anxieties. In *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, Juan Luis Vives conveys the notion that "with silence bothe wysdome and chaste be swetely poudered" (63). Given advances in elite female education, and the increased influence of aristocratic ladies in the Tudor court, there were good reasons for male courtiers to engineer the silence of ladies, should they wish to retain their position of authority. Whilst Vives argues for the necessity of women's learning and encourages it, the women's education he demands functions to heighten their chastity and improve their domestic skills, which paradoxically means that they should keep their silence. Vives seems thus to have shared the male courtiers' augmenting concern about the new phenomenon.

II. Fortune So Human in Wyatt's Poems

Wyatt bears antithetical feelings toward Fortune. Despite the humiliating betrayal of the beloved, Wyatt's lover often times shows, though at times sarcastically, an appreciation of Fortune. In Wyatt's "If euer man might him auaunt" (CCXLIX), it is certain that the lover is indebted to Fortune for his former success: "Some tyme I stode so in her grace" (9); "I had [...] / Ech grace that I did craue. / Thus fortunes will was vnto me [...]" (17-19). His thanking her, however, contradicts what he must have had to bear now because of her fickleness: "Sith fortunes will is now so bent / To plague me thus, pore man, / I must my selfe therwith content: / And beare it as I can" (37-40). The lover pathetically tries to

be content with the present disastrous situation, being well aware of her essential changeableness. Apparently showing his understanding of Fortune's will, his struggle to overcome his desire continues.

Looking back on those days when the lover was in love, in "They fle from me," not only the past erotic favour—the dream-like sweet aspect of desire he recalls in the second stanza—but also those women's desertion of the lover remain very real to him and of that there is no doubt in his mind: "It was no dreme: I lay brode waking" (15). Here, Wyatt might have employed the vision of erotic love which was dealt with in mediaeval English lyrics: as P. J. Frankis says, "the theme of the erotic dream and the disillusionment of waking" (229). However, as Wyatt's speaker strongly denies that he was dreaming, there seems to be no hint of the contrast between dream and reality that Frankis suggests is essential in Wyatt's love lyric. What would it signify to him to acknowledge he was dreaming then? To indulge in something as ephemeral as daydreaming would be far more inconsequent than his own clear remembrance of past favours granted and pleasures enjoyed. Having once been the recipient of the lady's favour is of great import to Wyatt's lover-narrator, even though he is now forsaken by her. Thus what we observe in the dream-like imagery of "They fle from me" is not the contrast between dream and reality that Frankis pointed out, but the passage of time in which Wyatt himself has really been involved and unstably tasted the sweetness and bitterness of Fortune/lady. For the poet-lover, the lady simply by the name of "Fortune" controls a wheel of time, which goes round clockwise, ceaselessly ticking.⁸ The fantasy of goddess Fortune disappears and the poet-lover is more aware of the actual flow of time at the same time as the people in his real life.

The poet's realistic employment of the poetic beloved might be explained in accordance with his consciousness of time, which can also be perceived in some

⁸ As Patch gives an explanation, the allusion of Fortune and that of Time in fact came to be confused at some point in history. Fortune and Time have the identical influence: "Both give blows, become contrary, raise and ruin" (115). Also, Kurose refers to the fact that as the modern scientific thought of time grew, the practical idea that any change for people is caused not by Fortune but rather by flight of time was established in the process of Renaissance. Theory of time could be considered just logical, beyond the allegorical convention (*Unmei* 225).

other poems. Another of Wyatt's well-known poems, "Who so list to hounte I know where is an hynde" (VII) is one example. The sonnet is a free imitation of Petrarch; and Wyatt effaces the original picturesque depiction, replacing it with a worldly hunting metaphor. Petrarch begins,

Una candida cerva sopra l'erba
verde m'apparve, con duo corna d'oro,
fra due riviere all'ombra d'un alloro,
levando 'l sole, a la stagione acerba. (1-4)
(A white doe on the green grass appeared to me, with two golden horns,
between two rivers, in the shade of a laurel, when the sun was rising in the
unripe season.)⁹

The hind wears a collar which is beautifully engraved with topaz as, "Nessun mi tocchi,...Libera farmi al mio Cesare parve" ("Let no one touch me,...It has pleased my Caesar to make me free"). And the ending is as follows:

Et era 'l sol già vòlto al mezzo giorno,
gli occhi miei stanchi di mirar, non sazi,
quand'io caddi ne l' acqua, et ella sparve. (12-14)
(And the sun had already turned at midday; my eyes were tired by looking
but not sated, when I fell into the water, and she disappeared.)

In the meantime Wyatt's version is led by a man, the hunter who has exhausted himself chasing the hind:

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,
But as for me, helas, I may no more.
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,
I am of them that farthest cometh behind. (1-4)

⁹ Petrarch's original and its translation are taken from Robert M. Durling, ed. and trans., *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics* (London: Harvard UP, 1976), pp. 336-37.

The dream-like image of a white doe in the original, appearing in the shade of a laurel and disappearing in the end, is absent. Wyatt's white hind does not disappear. She stands before the hunters (who never appear in the original), declaring in silence that she belongs to someone else: "Noli me tangere for Cesars I ame" (13) is engraved with diamonds on her collar, and this line is the ending of Wyatt's poem. Read as a reference to Henry VIII's possession of Anne Boleyn, Wyatt's version bears quite a mundane tone.¹⁰ His hind-lady is very human; and the sonnet's anti-dream-like quality makes the poet's fixation on contemporaneity prominent. And thus Wyatt's ladies in his poems are substantial; and he is, good or ill, in the poetic sense at least, more intimate with his beloved ones than those conventional poet-lovers who have idealised and kept their ladies at a distance.

Fortune in Wyatt's poems is, on the face of it, a conventional female of cruel and fickle nature. And yet at the same time, as has been discussed above, she represents a material lady endemic to the time and to himself. Wyatt is, in effect, trying to displace his fears about women's social and cultural influence at court onto the sphere of amatory verse, exploring his reaction to a real cultural power through the medium of an imaginary emotional one. In so doing he is, to some extent at least, able to reduce an unsettling and novel cultural phenomenon, the educated, influential court lady, to a more manageable and conventional textual one: the "cruel" mistress.

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¹⁰ As has been mentioned above, Wyatt, accused of a relationship with Anne, was imprisoned in 1536. However it is alleged that they had a relationship long before her marriage. See Kenneth Muir, *The Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1963), pp. 13-37.

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