

## They Flee from Me By Sir Thomas Wyatt

They flee from me that sometime did me seek  
With naked foot stalking in my chamber.  
I have seen them gentle tame and meek  
That now are wild and do not remember  
That sometime they put themselves in danger  
To take bread at my hand; and now they range  
Busily seeking with a continual change.  
Thanked be fortune, it hath been otherwise  
Twenty times better; but once in special,  
In thine array after a pleasant guise,  
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,  
And she me caught in their arms long and small;  
Therewithal sweetly did me kiss,  
And softly said, "dear heart, how like you this?"  
It was no dream: I lay broad waking.  
But all is turned through my gentleness  
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;  
And I have leave to go of her goodness,  
And she also to use new fangledness.  
But since that I so kindly am served,  
I would fain know what she hath deserved.<sup>1</sup>

### Portrait of Sir Thomas Wyatt



Taken from <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/wyatt.htm>

They fle from me that sometyme did me seke  
With naked fote stalking in my chambre.

I have sene theim gentill tame and meke,  
That nowe are wyld and do not remembre  
That sometyme they put theimself in daunger  
To take bred at my hand; and nowe they raunge  
Besely seking with a continuell change.

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;  
Therewith all swetely did me kysse,  
And softely saide, *dere hert, howe like you this?*

It was no dreme: I lay brode waking.  
But all is torned, thorough my gentilnes,  
Into a straunge fasshion of forsaking;  
And I have leve to goo of her goodness,  
And she also to vse new fangilnes:  
But syns that I so kyndely am serued,  
I would fain knowe what she hath deserued<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Taken from The Longman Anthology: British Literature

<sup>2</sup> Taken from Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt

1	They flee from me that sometime did me seek	According to Leigh Winser, this poem is a “device” to raise the question of unfaithfulness (‘new fangiless’) and to spark a debate” (4). Wyatt wrote the poem to question the social standard of his time and to induce response from his readers (5). On another note, John LeVay states that the words <i>flee</i> , <i>seek</i> and <i>stalking</i> confuse who is the hunted and who is the hunter (4). Is it the women who are the hunters, or the man?
2	With naked foot stalking in my chamber.	Leigh Winser states that in the first stanza, Wyatt uses a metaphor to conceal the true subject that he is questioning. Wyatt uses animal characteristics to portray women, to disguise his subject of faithfulness, which is a truly “human subject” (5).
3	I have seen them gentle tame and meek	
4	That now are wild and do not remember	Contrary to LeVay, Cecile Williamson Cary, claims that even though the words <i>seek</i> and <i>stalking</i> creates an ambiguous identification of the hunter and the hunted, the use of the words <i>tame</i> and <i>wild</i> clearly define the female as animalistic and the male as “the traditional role of master and hunter” (87).
5	That sometime they put themselves in danger	
6	To take bread at my hand; and now they range	According to Leonard Nathan, the relationship between the female and male is hopeless. The speaker is attributing the female figure as an animal, so their relationship is between animal and man and therefore causing it to be <i>tense</i> and <i>strange</i> , which in turn forces the liaison to lack stability (12).
7	Busily seeking with a continual change.	The meter in this poem is rhyme royal. The stanza includes seven ten syllable lines and the rhyme scheme is a b a b b c c.
8	Thanked be fortune, it hath been otherwise	
9	Twenty times better; but once in special,	
10	In thine array after a pleasant guise,	
11	When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,	
12	And she me caught in their arms long and small;	Leonard Nathan suggests that Wyatt is breaking with 15 <sup>th</sup> Century courtly conventions. He states that the woman is the aggressor by catching the speaker in her arms and that the male (the speaker) is the passive figure (12-13).
13	Therewithal sweetly did me kiss,	Cary states that instead of the common belief among critics to view this stanza as portraying the male as passive, she believes that this is a moment of “‘androgyny’ the participants are momentarily freed from the courtly, Petrarchan, traditional roles which entrap them in rigid identities....this is civilized love-making” (88).
14	And softly said, “dear heart, how like you this”?	
15	It was no dream: I lay broad waking.	
16	But all is turned through my gentleness	According to Donald M. Friedman, by using the word <i>gentleness</i> and <i>forsaken</i> , the speaker is trying understand the “rejection he has undergone” (5). This rejection is a catastrophe to the speaker because, according to Barbara L. Estrin, he has undergone a switch in roles (438). John P. LeVay claims that at the beginning of the poem he plays

		the dominate role by having many mistresses, then in the second stanza he allows himself one mistress, who in the third stanza leaves him, so he is the one left stranded as he stranded his many mistresses in the first stanza (4). Cecile Williamson Cary states that the reason for his desertion is because he was too <i>gentle</i> . The modern meaning of the word is kind and mild; the old meaning of the world is being too noble and chivalrous. In her words she says that “the first meaning suggests that he now thinks he did not play a sufficiently manly role, the second that he overplayed the role of courtly lover” (89).
17	Into a strange fashion of forsaking;	
18	And I have leave to go of her goodness,	Wyatt begins his poem with “’covert’ speech” and gradually moves to a more “open” approach according to Leigh Winser. He is disguising his subject by using a metaphor in the first stanza and then by the third stanza is directly addressing the issue of <i>new fangilness</i> (5).
19	And she also to use new fangledness.	Ronald A. Rebholz defines <i>newfangleness</i> as “the propensity of human beings to seek new ojects to love, to change loves, by unfaithful and, by extension, promiscuous in the quest of the new” (Cary 88).
20	But since that I so kindly am served,	According to John LeVay, the word <i>kindly</i> is ambiguous and ambivalent. He states that according to Joost Daalder, this word is ironic. However, LeVay believes that he is “receiving payment in kind” (3); in other words, he is being paid back in the same way as he has done. He is being jilted as he has done to so many women.
21	I would fain know what she hath deserved.	According to Leigh Winser, this last line may be “merely rhetorical” instead of proposing to the reader to make their own judgment on the question of infidelity (7).

## Works Cited

- Damrosch, David et al, eds. The Longman Anthology British Literature, Compact Edition. Vol. A. New York: Longman, 2003.
- Estrin, Barbara L. "Becoming the Other/ the Other Becoming in Wyatt's Poetry." ELH. 51.3 (1984): 431-445: JSTOR. Monmouth Coll. Lib., Monmouth, IL. 2 October 2003 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.
- Friedman, Donald M. "The Mind in the Poem: Wyatt's 'They Fle from Me'." Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 7.1, The English Renaissance (1967): 1-13. JSTOR. Monmouth Coll. Lib., Monmouth, IL. 2 October 2003 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.
- Jokinen, Anniina. "Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542)." Renaissance English Literature. 3 Jun. 1996. Luminarium. 5 Oct. 2003 <<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/wyatt.htm>>.
- LeVay, John P. "Wyatt's THEY FLEE FROM ME." Explicator 41.1 (1982): 3-4.
- Nathan, Leonard E. "Tradition and Newfangledness in Wyatt's 'They Fle from Me'." ELH 32.1 (1965): 1-16: JSTOR. Monmouth Coll. Lib., Monmouth, IL. 5 October 2003 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.
- Winser, Leigh. "The Question of Love Tradition in Wyatt's 'They Flee from Me'." Essays in Literature 2 (1975): 3-9.
- Wyatt, Sir Thomas. Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt. Ed. Kenneth Muir. Massachusetts: Harvard U P, 1950.