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The History Of English Poetry

From The Close of the Eleventh To The Commencement of the Eighteenth
Century

Warton, Thomas

London, 1781

Section XX. Sir Thomas Wyat. Inferior to Surrey as a writer of sonnets. His life. His genius characterised. Excels in moral poetry.

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S E C T. XX.

WITH Surrey's Poems, Tottel has joined, in his editions of 1557 and 1565, the SONGES and SONNETTES of sir Thomas Wyat the elder ^a, and of Uncertain Auctours.

Wyat was of Allington-castle in Kent, which he magnificently repaired, and educated in both our universities. But his chief and most splendid accomplishments were derived from his travels into various parts of Europe, which he frequently visited in the quality of an envoy. He was endeared to king Henry the eighth, who did not always act from caprice, for his fidelity and success in the execution of public business, his skill in arms, literature, familiarity with languages, and lively conversation. Wood, who degrades every thing by poverty of style and improper representations, says, that "the king was in a high manner delighted " with his *witty jests* ^b." It is not perhaps improbable, that Henry was as much pleased with his repartees as his politics. He is reported to have occasioned the reformation by a joke, and to have planned the fall of cardinal Wolfey by a seasonable story ^c. But he had almost lost his popularity, either from an intimacy with queen Anne Boleyn, which was called a connection, or the gloomy cabals of bishop Bonner, who could not bear his political superiority. Yet his prudence and integrity, no less than the powers of his oratory, justified his innocence. He laments his severe and unjust imprisonment on that trying occasion, in a sonnet addressed to sir Francis Bryan: insinuating his sollicitude, that although the wound would be healed, the scar would

^a Wyat's begin at fol. 19.

^b ATH. OXON. i. 51.

^c See MISCELLANEOUS ANTIQUITIES.

Numb. ii. pag. 16. Printed at Strawberry-hill, 1772. 4to.

remain,

remain, and that to be acquitted of the accusation would avail but little, while the thoughts of having been accused were still fresh in remembrance^d. It is a common mistake, that he died abroad of the plague in an embassy to Charles the fifth. Being sent to conduct that emperor's ambassador from Falmouth to London, from too eager and a needless desire of executing his commission with dispatch and punctuality, he caught a fever by riding in a hot day, and in his return died on the road at Shirburn, where he was buried in the great conventual church, in the year 1541. The next year, Leland published a book of Latin verses on his death, with a wooden print of his head prefixed, probably done by Holbein^e. It will be superfluous to transcribe the panegyrics of his contemporaries, after the encomium of lord Surrey, in which his amiable character owes more to truth, than to the graces of poetry, or to the flattery of friendship.

We must agree with a critic above quoted, that Wyatt cooperated with Surry, in having corrected the roughness of our poetic style. But Wyatt, although sufficiently distinguished from the common versifiers of his age, is confessedly inferior to Surrey in harmony of numbers, perspicuity of expression, and facility of phraseology. Nor is he equal to Surrey in elegance of sentiment, in nature and sensibility. His feelings are disguised by affectation, and obscured by conceit. His declarations of passion are embarrassed by wit and fancy; and his style is not intelligible, in proportion as it is careless and unadorned. His compliments, like the modes of behaviour in that age, are ceremonious and strained. He has too much art as a lover, and too little as a poet. His gallantries are laboured, and his versification negligent. The truth is, his genius was of the moral and didactic species: and his poems abound more in good sense, satire, and observations on life, than in pathos or imagination. Yet there

^d Fol. 44.

^e *NENÆ in mortem T. Viati*, Lond.

1542. 4to. See also Leland's ENCOM.
p. 358.

is a degree of lyric sweetness in the following lines to his lute, in which, *The lover complaineth of the unkindness of his love.*

My Lute awake, performe the last
Labour, that thou and I shall waite;
And end that I have now begonne:
And when this song is sung and past,
My lute be still, for I have done.

As to be heard where care is none,
As leade to grave in marble stone;
My song, now pearse her hart as sone.
Should we then sigh, or sing, or mone?
No, no, my lute, for I have done.

The rockes do not so cruelly
Repulse the waves continually,
As she my sute and affection:
So that I am past remedy.
Whereby^f my lute and I have done.

Proude of the spoile which thou has gotte
Of simple hartes, through Loves shotte,
By whom unkinde thou hast them wonne;
Thinke not he hath his bowe forgotte,
Although my lute and I have done.

Vengeance shall fall on thy disdain,
That makest but game on earnest paine:
Thinke not alone under the sunne
Unquit^g to cause thy lovers plaine:
Although my lute and I have done.

May chauce thee^h lie withered and olde
In winter nightes that are so colde,
Plaining in vaine unto the moneⁱ:
Thy wishes then dare not be tolde:
Care then who list, for I have done.

^f Wherefore.
^g Unacquitted. Free.

^h It may chance you may, &c.
ⁱ Moon.

And

And then may chauce thee to repent
 The time that thou hast lost and spent,
 To cause thy lovers fighe and swowne;
 Then shalt thou know beautie but lent,
 And wish and want as I have done.

Now cease my lute, this is the last
 Labour, that thou and I shall wast;
 And ended is that that we begonne:
 Now is this song both song and past,
 My lute be still, for I have done^k.

Our author has more imitations, and even translations, from the Italian poets than Surrey: and he seems to have been more fond of their conceits. Petrarch has described the perplexities of a lover's mind, and his struggles betwixt hope and despair, a subject most fertile of sentimental complaint, by a combination of contrarieties, a species of wit highly relished by the Italians. I am, says he, neither at peace nor war. I burn, and I freeze. I soar to heaven, and yet grovel on the earth. I can hold nothing, and yet grasp every thing. My prison is neither shut, nor is it opened. I see without eyes, and I complain without a voice. I laugh, and I weep. I live, and am dead. Laura, to what a condition am I reduced, by your cruelty!

Pace non trovo, e non ho da far guerra;
 E temo, e spero, ed ardo, e son en un ghiaccio:
 E volo sopra'l cielo, e giaccio in terra:
 E nulla stringo, e tutto l'mondo abraiccio.
 Tal m'ha in prigion, che non m'apre nè ferra;
 Nè per suo mi rittien, ne scioglie il laccio;
 E non m'uccide Amor, e non mi sferra;
 Nè mi vuol vivo, nè mi trae d'impaccio.

^k Fol. 33.

^l This passage is taken from Messen Jordi, a Provençal poet of Valencia.

Veggio senz'occhi, e non ho lingua, e grido;
 E bramo di perir, e cheggio aita;
 Ed ho in odio me stesso, ed amo altrui:
 Pascomi di dolor, piangendo rido.
 Egualmente mi spiace morte, e vita:
 In questo stato son, Donna, per vui^a.

Wyat has thus copied this sonnet of epigrams.

I finde no peace, and all my warre is done:
 I feare and hope, I burne and frese likewyse:
 I flye aloft, and yet cannot aryse;
 And nought I have, and at the world I sease;
 That lockes^a nor loseth, [nor] holdeth me in prison,
 And holdes me not, yet can I scape no wise;
 Nor lettes me live, nor dye, at my devise,
 And yet of death it giveth me occasion.
 Without eye I se, without tong I playne:
 I wish to perish, yet I aske for helth;
 I love another, and I hate my selfe;
 I fede me in sorow, and laugh in all my paine.
 Lo thus displeaseth me both death and life
 And my delight is causer of this strife^b.

It was from the capricious and over-strained invention of the Italian poets, that Wyatt was taught to torture the passion of love by prolix and intricate comparisons, and unnatural allusions. At one time his love is a galley steered by cruelty through stormy seas and dangerous rocks; the sails torn by the blast of tempestuous sighs, and the cordage consumed by incessant showers of tears: a cloud of grief envelopes the stars, reason is drowned,

^a Sonn. ciii. There is a Sonnet in imitation of this, among those of the UNCERTAIN AUCTORS at the end of Surrey's Poems, fol. 107. And in Davison's POEMS,

B. ii. CANZON. viii. p. 108. 4th edit. Lond. 1621. 12mo.

^b That which locks, i. e. a key.

* Fol. 21, 22.

and the haven is at a distance^p. At another^q, it is a spring trickling from the summit of the Alps, which gathering force in its fall, at length overflows all the plain beneath^r. Sometimes, it is a gun, which being overcharged, expands the flame within itself, and bursts in pieces^s. Sometimes it is like a prodigious mountain, which is perpetually weeping in copious fountains, and sending forth sighs from its forests: which bears more leaves than fruits: which breeds wild-beasts, the proper emblems of rage, and harbours birds that are always singing^t. In another of his sonnets, he says, that all nature sympathises with his passion. The woods resound his elegies, the rivers stop their course to hear him complain, and the grass weeps in dew. These thoughts are common and fantastic. But he adds an image which is new, and has much nature and sentiment, although not well expressed.

The huge oaks have rored in the winde,
Eche thing, methought, complaining in theyr kinde.

This is a touch of the pensive. And the apostrophe which follows is natural and simple.

Ah stony hart, who hath thus framed thee
So cruel, that art clothed with beautie^u!

And there is much strength in these lines of the lover to his bed.

The place of slepe, wherein I do but wake,
Besprent with tears, my bed, I thee forsake^v!

But such passages as these are not the general characteristics of Wyatt's poetry. They strike us but seldom, amidst an imprac-

^p Fol. 22.
^q Fol. 25.
^r Fol. 25.
^s Fol. 29.

^t Fol. 36.
^u Fol. 24.
^v Fol. 25.

ricable mass of forced reflections, hyperbolic metaphors, and complaints that move no compassion.

But Wyat appears a much more pleasing writer, when he moralises on the felicities of retirement, and attacks the vanities and vices of a court, with the honest indignation of an independent philosopher, and the freedom and pleasantry of Horace. Three of his poetical epistles are professedly written in this strain, two to John Paines^v, and the other to sir Francis Bryan: and we must regret, that he has not left more pieces in a style of composition for which he seems to have been eminently qualified. In one of the epistles to Paines on the life of a courtier, are these spirited and manly reflections.

Myne owne John Paines, since ye delite to know
The causes why that homewarde I me drawe,
And flee the prease^w of courtes, where so they go^x;
Rather than to live thrall under the awe
Of lordly looks, wrapped within my cloke;
To will and lust learning to set a law:
It is not that, because I scorne or mocke
The power of them, whom Fortune here hath lent
Charge over us, of Right^y to strike the stroke:
But true it is, that I have alwayes ment
Lesse to esteeme them, (than the common sort)
Of outwarde things that judge, in their entent,
Without regarde what inward doth resort.
I graunt sometime of glory that the fire
Doth touch my heart. Me list not to report^z
Blame by honour, nor honour to desire.
But how can I this honour now attaine,
That cannot die the colour black a liar?

^v He seems to have been a person about the court. See LIFE of Sir Thomas Pope, p. 46.

^w Prefs. Croud.

^x The court was perpetually moving from one palace to another.

^y Justice.

^z To speak favourably of what is bad.

My Paines, I cannot frame my tune^a to faine,
To cloke the truth, &c.

In pursuit of this argument, he declares his indisposition and inability to disguise the truth, and to flatter, by a variety of instances. Among others, he protests he cannot prefer Chaucer's TALE of SIR THOPAS to his PALAMON AND ARCITE.

Prayse SIR THOPAS for a noble tale,
And scorne the STORY that the KNIGHT tolde;
Praise him for counsell that is dronke of ale:
Grinne when he laughes, that beareth all the sway;
Frowne when he frownes, and grone when he is pale:
On others lust to hang both night and day, &c.

I mention this circumstance about Chaucer, to shew the esteem in which the KNIGHT'S TALE, that noble epic poem of the dark ages, was held in the reign of Henry eighth, by men of taste.

The poet's execration of flatterers and courtiers is contrasted with the following entertaining picture of his own private life and rural enjoyments at Allingham-castle in Kent.

This is the cause that I could never yet
Hang on their sleeves, that weigh, as thou maist se,
A chippe of chance more than a pounce of wit:
This maketh me at home to hunt and hawke,
And in fowle wether at my booke to sit;
In frost and snowe then with my bow to stalke;
No man doth marke wherefo I ride or go:
In lusty leas^b at liberty I walke:
And of these newes I fele no weale nor wo:

^a Perhaps the reading is *longue*.

^b In large fields. Over fruitful grounds.

Save that a clogge doth hange yet at my hele^c ;
 No force for that, for it is ordred so,
 That I may leape both hedge and dike ful wele.
 I am not now in Fraunce, to judge the wine, &c.
 But I am here in Kent and Christendome,
 Among the Muses, where I reade and rime ;
 Where if thou list, mine owne John Poines to come,
 Thou shalt be judge how do I spende my time^d.

In another epistle to John Poines, on the security and happiness of a moderate fortune, he verifies the fable of the City and Country Mousse with much humour.

My mother's maides, when they do sowe and spinne,
 They sing a song made of the feldishe mouse, &c.

This fable appositely suggests a train of sensible and pointed observations on the weakness of human conduct, and the delusive plans of life.

Alas, my Poines, how men do seke the best,
 And finde the worse by error as they stray :
 And no marvell, when sight is so opprest,
 And blindes the guide : anone out of the way
 Goeth guide and all, in seking quiet lyfe.
 O wretched myndes ! There is no golde that may
 Graunt that you seke : no warre, no peace, no strife :
 No, no, although thy head were hoopt with golde :
 Serjaunt at mace, with hawbert^e, sworde, nor knife,
 Cannot repulse the care that folow shoulde.
 Eche kinde of life hath with him his disease :
 Live in delites, even as thy lust would,

^c Probably he alludes to some office which he still held at court; and which sometimes recalled him, but not too frequently, from the country.

^d Fol. 47.

^e Halbert. A parade of guards, &c. The classical allusion is obvious.

And

And thou shalt finde, when lust doth most thee please,
 It irketh strait, and by itself doth fade.
 A small thing is it, that may thy minde appease?
 None of you al there is that is so madde,
 To seke for grapes on brambles or on breeres^g;
 Nor nonne, I trowe, that hath a wit so badde,
 To sett his hay for conneyes oer rivères.
 Nor yet set not a drag net for a hare:
 And yet the thing that most is your desire
 You do misseke, with more travell and care.
 Make plaine thine hart, that it be not knotted
 With hope or drede: and se thy will be bare^h
 From all affectsⁱ, whom vice hath never spotted.
 Thyself content with that is thee affinde^k;
 And use it wel that is to the allotted.
 Then seke no more out of thyself to fynde,
 The thing that thou hast sought so long before,
 For thou shalt feele it sticking in thy mynde.—

These Platonic doctrines are closed with a beautiful applica-
 tion of virtue personified, and introduced in her irresistible
 charms of visible beauty. For those who deviate into vain and
 vicious pursuits,

None other paine pray I for them to be,
 But when the rage doth leade them from the right,
 That, loking backwarde, VIRTUE they may se
 Even as she is, so goodly faire and bright^l!

With these disinterested strains we may join the following
 single stanza, called THE COURTIER'S LIFE.

^g So read, instead of *brarys*.
^h Free.

ⁱ Passions.

^k Assigned.
^l Fol. 45, 46.

In

In court to serve, decked with freshe aray,
 Of sugred^m meates feeling the swete repaste;
 The life in bankets, and fundry kindes of play,
 Amid the prease of worldly lookes to waste:
 Hath with it joinde oft times such bitter taste,
 That whofo joyes such kind of life to hold,
 In prifon joyes, fettred with chaines of goldⁿ.

Wyat may justly be deemed the first polished English satirist. I am of opinion, that he mistook his talents when, in compliance with the mode, he became a sonneteer; and, if we may judge from a few instances, that he was likely to have treated any other subject with more success than that of love. His abilities were seduced and misapplied in fabricating fine speeches to an obdurate mistress. In the following little ode, or rather epigram, on a very different occasion, there is great simplicity and propriety, together with a strain of poetic allusion. It is on his return from Spain into England.

Tagus farewell, that westward with thy stremes
 Turnes up the graines of gold al redy tride^o!
 For I with spurre and sayle go seke the Temes^p,
 Gainward the funne that shewes her welthy pride:
 And to the town that Brutus fought by dremes^q,
 Like bended moone^r that leanes her lusty^s fide;
 My king, my countrey I feke, for whom I live:
 O mighty Jove, the windes for this me give^t!

Among Wyat's poems is an unfinished translation, in Alexandrine verse, of the Song of Iopas in the first book of Virgil's *Encid*^u. Wyat's and Surrey's versions from Virgil are the first

^m Delicious.
ⁿ Fol. 44.
^o Pure gold.
^p The Thames.
^q A tradition in Geoffrey of Menmouth.

^r The old city from the river appeared in the shape of a crescent.
^s Strong, flourishing, populous, &c.
^t Fol. 44.
^u Fol. 49.

regular translations in English of an antient classic poet: and they are symptoms of the restoration of the study of the Roman writers, and of the revival of elegant literature. A version of David's Psalms by Wyat is highly extolled by lord Surrey and Leland. But Wyat's version of the PENITENTIAL PSALMS seems to be a separate work from his translation of the whole Psalter, and probably that which is praised by Surrey, in an ode above quoted, and entitled, *Praise of certain Psalmes of David, translated by Sir T. Wyat the elder* *. They were printed with this title, in 1549. "Certaine Psalmes chosen out of the
 "Psalmes of David commonly called vij penytentiall Psalmes,
 "drawen into Englishe meter by fir Thomas Wyat knyght,
 "whereunto is added a prolog of the aucthore before every
 "Psalme very pleafant and profettable to the godly reader.
 "Imprinted at London in Paules Churchyarde at the sygne of
 "the starre by Thomas Raynald and John Harryngton, cum
 "previlegio ad imprimendum solum, MDXLIX." Leland seems to speak of the larger version.

Transtulit in nostram Davidis carmina linguam,
 Et numeros magna reddidit arte pares.
 Non morietur OPUS tersum, SPECTABILE, sacrum *.

But this version, with that of Surrey mentioned above, is now lost †: and the pious Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins are the only immortal translators of David's Psalms.

A similarity, or rather sameness of studies, as it is a proof, so perhaps it was the chief cement, of that inviolable friendship which is said to have subsisted between Wyat and Surrey. The principal subject of their poetry was the same: and they both treated the passion of love in the spirit of the Italian poets,

* Fol. 16. [See supr. p. 18.]

* NÆN. ut supr.

† See Hollinsh. CHRON. iii. p. 978. col. 2.

and as professed disciples of Petrarch. They were alike devoted to the melioration of their native tongue, and an attainment of the elegancies of composition. They were both engaged in translating Virgil, and in rendering select portions of Scripture into English metre.

S E C T.