



Portrait of Sir Thomas Wyatt by Hans Holbein, published by J. Chamberlain in 1812, Wikimedia Commons.

A Short Analysis of Sir Thomas Wyatt's 'The Pillar Perished' MAY 3

A summary of a classic early sonnet

Sir Thomas Wyatt wrote the earliest sonnets in English, and was a key figure in English Renaissance poetry. 'The Pillar Perished', as the sonnet beginning 'The pillar perish'd is whereto I leant' is sometimes known, is one of the most widely anthologised of Wyatt's sonnets. At least, it's now largely attributed to Wyatt, and certainly sounds like his work. Closer analysis of the sonnet's language and imagery opens a window onto the world of the Tudor royal court, and reveals a heart-breaking expression of a man's world that has crumbled around him.

The pillar perish'd is whereto I leant,
The strongest stay of my unquiet mind;
The like of it no man again can find,
From east to west still seeking though he went,
To mine unhap. For hap away hath rent
Of all my joy the very bark and rind:
And I, alas, by chance am thus assign'd
Daily to mourn, till death do it relent.
But since that thus it is by destiny,
What can I more but have a woeful heart;
My pen in plaint, my voice in careful cry,
My mind in woe, my body full of smart;
And I myself, myself always to hate,
Till dreadful death do ease my doleful state.

Like another of Wyatt's most celebrated sonnets, 'Whoso List to Hunt', 'The Pillar Perished' is a loose translation of a sonnet originally written in Italian by Petrarch (1304-74). Indeed, it was Wyatt who introduced the sonnet form to England, after he had travelled to Italy on a diplomatic mission

in the 1530s (something covered in our short overview of Wyatt's life and work). In Petrarch's original poem, the 'pillar' metaphor was suggested by the etymological derivation of Petrarch's friend and patron, Giovanni Colonna (whose surname means 'column' or, if you will, 'pillar'). When Colonna died, Petrarch wrote his sonnet as an elegy about his friend. Why would Wyatt have wished to translate and adapt this particular sonnet? Well, as in 'Whoso List to Hunt' – in which it is possible to read coded references to Anne Boleyn – Wyatt may have been inspired to write 'The Pillar Perished' following the death of his friend and patron, Thomas Cromwell, King Henry VIII's 'Mr Fix-It' who ended up not being able to fix it, and was executed in July 1540.

We might paraphrase the meaning of 'The Pillar Perished' as follows: 'The pillar against which I leant for support has perished. It was the strongest influence on my troubled mind, and kept it in check. I cannot find another to replace that pillar that has gone: even if you looked from east to west, you would not find something that could allay my misfortune. For chance, or fortune, has torn away the very outer covering of my joy, and I have no choice but to mourn its loss daily, until death relieves me of the pain. But since destiny or fate decrees that I must be like this, what can I do but accept it and be unhappy? The pen I write with, along with my voice, mind, and body, all mourn its loss and every part of me feels the pain. And I am destined to hate myself for this, until death eases me of this misery.'

We've remarked in previous analyses of Wyatt's poetry that paraphrase can aid understanding but it loses the sheer linguistic deftness – and emotional resonance – of what Wyatt actually wrote. Take that first line, with its plosive alliteration and the foregrounding of 'perished': rewrite it as 'The pillar whereto I leant is perished' and you see the change, and not just to the scansion of the line. The same goes for that penultimate line: 'And I myself, myself always to hate'. It's unclear why Wyatt felt so consumed with self-loathing in the wake of Cromwell's death – that is, if we follow that contextual interpretation of the sonnet. Did he feel that he hadn't done enough to help his friend and patron? Cromwell's downfall – precipitated, though not solely caused, by the diplomatic cock-up involving Henry's marriage to Anne of Cleves, whom Henry likened to a Flanders mare – was not the first time Wyatt had seen those close to him end up with their heads on the chopping-block.

Another of Wyatt's poems, 'Innocentia Veritas Viat Fides Circumdederunt me inimici mei', was probably written in the wake of the execution of Anne Boleyn and those implicated in her 'adultery', in 1536. Wyatt escaped execution on that occasion, but he had to watch Anne being beheaded from the window of his cell in the Tower of London. With Cromwell's death, Wyatt's last support had gone and 'The Pillar Perished' is a heartfelt analysis of his own grief and misery in the wake of the loss of that support and friendship. Only death could ease his 'doleful state' now. His own death would come two years later, in 1542.