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### Don't Hate the Instrument, Hate the Player

Sir Thomas Wyatt's "My lute, awake!" is a lyric poem about unrequited love and rejection. It spells out a man's unheard song, echoing into the void left by his presumably heartless beloved. However, there is certainly more at play in this work addressed to a lute rather than a lover. A close reading (focusing on lines 1-25) reveals a love triangle of sorts, filled with unanswered calls, painful disregard, and unwarranted violence. The victimized speaker turns perpetrator as he grabs his lute, first to serenade then to lament and finally to bash his beloved. The only blameless party seems to be the poor lute—collateral damage in an insignificant romance. But the lute is so much more—a faithful lover, close by yet ignored, unappreciated.

This is clear from the very beginning. Whether one considers the poem to start with the title or the first line, the result is the same: "My lute, awake!" (1). The lute is anthropomorphized, not only implied to be asleep, but urged in the imperative to get up. The syntax of the command is illuminating in this context. The emphasis that comes with the concluding exclamation point adds a sense of urgency. It is easy to imagine the lute being shaken awake as it is taken up from its resting place in the middle of the night. Even more telling: like a name, "My lute," is followed by a comma to distinguish the addressee. The following piece thus becomes an epistolary poem as well as a lyric, though the subject remains unnamed. One must wonder if the lute's name is simply left out of the poem or if the speaker does not care enough about his instrument to give it a name (let alone a nickname or a pet name). Regardless, despite

its personification, the lute is treated impersonally, tossed around and bossed around—“awake ... Perform ... Labor ... be still,” all within the first stanza (1-2, 5).

The poem is technically written to the lute, but it is only nominally so. The true focus of the piece seems to be anything but that. In the second stanza, the speaker is quick to wish “As to be heard where ear is none” (6). He fails to recognize that the lute is not only there *for* him, but also there with him late at night, listening to his many complaints. Instead, he claims that his song is going completely unheard, indirectly evoking the image of a tree falling in a forest with no one to hear it. The speaker’s allusion to this proverbial paradox (at least to the modern reader given that this phrase likely had not been popularized yet) comes off as especially ignorant because of the lute’s roots as a wooden instrument carved from a tree. This disregard is made even more explicit soon after, when the speaker asks, “Should we then sigh or sing or moan?” before answering himself: “No, no, my lute, for I have done” (9-10). Despite the reference to the lute in his answer at the end of the stanza, the speaker once again discounts the instrument’s presence. He doesn’t afford his lute a chance to answer his question, turning the conversation into a monologue where the speaker talks *at* his lute rather than *to* it. Worse yet, one might perceive the speaker to be consciously or subconsciously (it is difficult to say which is worse) ignoring the lute’s voice. After all, the poem evokes the image of a lone lover in his room playing his lute and singing along. Moreover, it was published posthumously, likely “designed for special social occasions, to be recited or sometimes set to music and sung to the accompaniment of a lute” like many of Wyatt’s other works (Greenblatt et al. 119). In both of these cases, whether on paper or on stage, the lute sings along besides the speaker, responding to him; hypocritically, the speaker does not listen despite the lute’s attentive ear for his grievances, letting the instrument scream of its own unrequited love into a separate void. As such, the notes

of the accompanying lute never make it onto the sheet alongside the words of the poem. Even in performances of Wyatt's piece, though "the poems were written out, exchanged, and circulated in manuscript, both within a small, exclusive circle of friends and among those beyond the court," the music could not be acknowledged in the same way (Greenblatt et al. 119). The speaker, who exists within the bounds of the poem (one cannot assume it to be Wyatt himself), recognizes this fact, breaking the fourth wall to suggest that though his song may not be heard by his beloved, "As lead to grave in marble stone, / My song may pierce her heart as soon" as she hears the copies of it (7-8). These copies also likely forget the lute, adding insult to injury within the metaphysical realm of the poem as well as its physical reality.

This hostility towards the lute puts into question the real focus of the poem, the real addressee of the epistle. The speaker and the text alike are unfaithful, more dedicated to the indifferent beloved. The use of pronouns hints at this infidelity—at times preferring the first person plural and at others, first person singular. The poem itself is "Labor that *thou and I* [emphasis added] shall waste," but despite its vanity the speaker demands credit for the "end that *I* [emphasis added] have now begun" (3-4). Perhaps the time spent on the song is a waste because it involves only the lute and the player, whereas what said player claims to have "begun" and hopes to "end" is his love for the woman in question, not just the song itself. Addressing the lute is thus simply a matter of convenience, creation of a scapegoat, an accomplice, or even just company for his wasted time. But the focus on the lute is also a distraction, an image that the speaker tries hard to uphold by name even if the content of the poem remains about his unrequited love. The sleepless speaker is exposed through his careless use of pronouns time and time again. At one point, his pronouns become ambiguous. As he speaks to the lute, the speaker imagines what would happen if "My song may pierce her heart as soon. / Should *we* [emphasis

added] then sigh or sing or moan?" (8-9). Perhaps the speaker doesn't wait for a response as brought up earlier, because "we" refers to him and someone else, the beloved. The context of the question doesn't help one make a distinction since the noises mentioned (sighing, singing, and moaning) could fit painful laments as well as they could euphoric sexual pleasure. At the end of the third stanza, the speaker makes an undeniable error, closing: "So that I am past remedy, / Whereby my lute and I have done" (14-15). In grieving over his pain, he slips up: "my lute" no longer takes the place of a name or an address, separated by a comma like before; it exists grammatically on its own, a character implicated along with the speaker in the love story being told. Suddenly, the illusion of the poem comes crashing down in its entirety as the subject blatantly switches to the beloved. With the very next line, opening the fourth stanza, the speaker ridicules the beloved directly: "Proud of the spoil that *thou* [emphasis added] hast got / Of simple hearts, thorough Love's shot" (16-17). This change is jarring to the reader, who is left uncertain of the identity behind this new "thou." The next line, cements that this pronoun was no mistake, adding how "unkind, *thou* [emphasis added] hast them [simple hearts] won" (18). As the speaker's anger builds up, he throws all caution to the wind, not just in terms of his pronouns. With his true motives out in the open, he redirects his hostility from his lute to his beloved: "Think not he [Love or Cupid] hath his bow forgot, / Although my lute and I have done. // Vengeance shall fall on thy disdain" (19-21). With the end of the third stanza, the speaker claims he will not take arms to defend himself, but the start of the fourth contradicts this thought with the increased suggestions of violence. The earlier reference to Love's "bow" merges together the image of the instrument and the weapon. The oud in the speaker's hand takes up new meaning as a way of consoling the speaker's wounded heart, repurposed in relation to the real subject of the poem. The beloved might be the one who will get her due for she "makest but game on earnest

pain” (22), but the speaker is the one playing the game and the instrument at the same time. There is no evidence that the beloved is even aware of his turmoil.

As such, a more hidden subject appears in the speaker himself, perhaps the final true unsung center of the lyric. The poem as a whole seems to revolve around him, self-centered and narcissistic. The whole time, he speaks to himself and with himself. Though the characters he mentions may certainly exist, they only matter in the way that they exist within his own mind and the extent that they get in the way of his story. Only his desires matter as he commands his lute or later, his beloved: “Think not ... Think not,” just accept my love (19, 23). There is nothing to suggest there was any real connection to this beloved that should cause such hurt. If anything, she seems justified. With the speaker, she would probably be left without a voice, besides perhaps a “sigh or sing or moan” (9). But even then, it is more likely that the speaker would offer her less: “My lute be still, for I have done” (5). If the lute can’t be saved, at least Wyatt also wrote, “Blame not my lute.”

Works Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen, George Logan, and Katharine Eisaman Maus. "Sir Thomas Wyatt The Elder." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, 10th ed., vol. B, New York, W.W. Norton And Company, 2018, pp. 118-120.

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