Early Modern England and the Sonnet Tradition in the 16th Century

Petrarch, Sir Thomas Wyatt, and Establishing the Sonnet Tradition

Petrarchan Tradition

- Francesco Petrarch, Italian poet, 1304-1374
- Sonnets focused mostly on unrequited love for “Laura,” whose true identity remains unknown.
  - Important Petrarchan tropes:
    - Love for an idealized lady, often visualized as a hunt: Poet=Hunter, Lover=Deer (notice the pun on deer/dear)
    - Political subtext used to criticize/praise politicians, rulers
- English poets/politicians sought to emulate Petrarch to bolster their own credibility as members of the royal court and as artists.

Sir Thomas Wyatt

- 1503-1542
- Member of Henry VIII's court
- Suspected to have been in love with Henry VIII's second wife, Anne Boleyn
- Once imprisoned for suspected adultery with Boleyn
  - "Whoso list to hunt" is widely considered to be about Anne Boleyn
  - The poem "Who list his wealth and ease retain" suggests that he watched her execution from his cell
  - And so, Wyatt's poems can be read as reactions to royal authority, specifically, to the corruption and abuses of royal power.
- Many of Wyatt's poems are translations/transformations of Petrarch's poems, so it helps to read them side-by-side.

Some Common Tropes of Early Modern Sonnets

- The tragedy of unrequited love
- A cold, unfeeling woman is usually (but not always) the speaker's love object (ice, frozen imagery)
- The speaker's fiery passion for the love object (fire, heat imagery)
- Poetic technique: blazon
  - A blazon is the description of the love object by focusing on the individual parts of her body
- Reversal of gender power dynamic:
  - Man=Submissive
  - Woman=Dominant
  - Some critics argue that the speaker is attempting to assert dominance by controlling the poetic image of the woman
  - Other scholars argue that the speaker experiences pleasure in adopting the submissive role in the poem, that suffering—and writing about that suffering—is the mark a true poet

Early Modern Sonnets

- Each sonnet presents and develops a problem the poet is experiencing.
- Sometime offering answers, sometimes not
- Tips for Reading Early Modern poetry:
  - Read “period to period.” Students can get tripped up with the language and the line breaks. These poets wrote in complete sentences, so read the poem from one period to the next.
  - The grammar appears odd because writers are attempting to follow a specific poetic meter (like iambic pentameter).
  - Look for the sentence’s main idea. Locating a sentence’s subject and verb will help.
  - It also helps to read the poems out loud.

Questions to Consider

- 1. How does Wyatt’s “Whoso list to hunt” or “They flee from me” (choose one) illuminate the speaker’s own frustrations with love?
- 2. How does “Whoso list to hunt” reveal Wyatt’s distaste with court corruption and royal power?
- 3. What does Wyatt’s use of imagery reveal about the society’s views on women?