Poem 2: A Poem by Sir Thomas Wyatt

To cause accord or to agre
Two contraries in oon degre
And in oon poynct, as semeth me,
To all mans wit it cannot be:
       It is impossible.

Of hete and cold when I complain
And say that hete doeth cause me pain,
When cold doeth shake me every vain
And both at ons, I say again
       It is impossible.

That man that hath his hert away,
If lyf lyveth there, as men do say,
That he hert-les should last on day

Alyve and not to torne to clay,
       It is impossible.

Twixt lyf and deth, say what who sayth,
There lyveth no lyf that draweth breth;
They joyne so nere and eke, i'feith,
To seke for lif by wissh of deth
       It is impossible.

Yet love that all thing doeth subdue,
Whose power ther may no lif eschew,
Hath wrought in me that I may rew
These mireacles to be so true,
       That are impossible.

(To reconcile or to unify two contrary things into a single quality and into a single state of being, it seems to me, that everyone would agree that it cannot be: it is impossible. When I complain about being hot and cold and say that fever causes me pain when chills make me shake in every part of my body and both happen at once, I say again that it is impossible. For that man who has lost his heart (if it is the seat of life, as everyone says) to remain alive without his heart for a single day and not turn into a corpse: it is impossible. Whatever anyone says, no living creature who draws breath can survive between life and death [because] they are so close together and also, indeed, it is impossible to seek to live by wishing for death. Yet love which rules over all things, and whose power no living thing can resist, has made within me (in such a way that I can regret it) these miracles, which are impossible, to be true.)

Context: Sir Thomas Wyatt was a courtier in the court of Henry VIII. He travelled abroad on dipomatic missions as an ambassador. He was twice imprisoned in the Tower, accused first of adultery with Anne Boleyn and later of verbal treason against the king. He wrote many short poems in different forms (sonnets, songs, ballades) and translated works from other languages, for example epistolary satires, penitential psalms, and Petrarch's sonnets.

Love through the Ages: Late Medieval and Early Tudor Poetry
AQA English Literature A, Unit 3 LITA3 Reading for Meaning

Resource prepared by Dr Jenni Nuttall
St Edmund Hall, University of Oxford
www.stylisticienne.com

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Love's capacity to bring about immense happiness but also to cause immense pain and heartache was often described in the Middle Ages (and in the early Tudor period) using paradoxes, impossibilities or oxymorons (a figure of speech combining two seemingly contradictory words, i.e. *bittersweet*). Alain of Lille, a medieval theologian, described love by a series of oxymorons, beginning 'love is peace joined with hatred, faith with fraud, hope with fear, and fury mixed with reason, pleasant shipwreck, light heaviness…' The Italian poet Petrarch described many of the physical symptoms of being in love as illogical or oxymoronic, e.g. being freezing cold in summer and burning with fever in winter. Using oxymorons to describe love was a way of indicating the irrational, seemingly illogical and unpredictable aspects of the power of love.

Questions to think about:

- Which particular paradoxes does Wyatt's speaker allude to here? Why does Wyatt select these particular impossibilities?
- What tone of voice does the speaker of the poem use?
- The speaker several times alludes to everyday assumptions and openions (e.g. 'as semeth me', 'as men do say', 'say what who sayth'). Why does he do this? Is love an everyday occurrence?
- The poem draws on medical and scientific ideas. Can you find examples of this? Is love something which can be explained by such scientific ideas?
- Why does love have the power to unite contrary things or leave a lover feeling like he is suspended between life and death? What does this tell us about love?
- Why does Wyatt call the impossible things 'miracles' at the end of the poem?

Form, Structure and Language:

- Look at the stanza form Wyatt uses. This combines four lines rhyming *aaaa* with a shorter fifth line (the repeated refrain). What is the effect of this monorhyming? Does it make the poem seem natural or artificial?
- As well as repeating rhymes at the end of lines, Wyatt also repeats rhyme sounds within each stanza (look for example) and repeats words ? What is the effect of this repetition?
- Why write a poem with a refrain? What job does the refrain do in each stanza?
- Does Wyatt indicate the illogical aspects of love via unexpected word orders or by difficult syntax?
- The last stanza describes something very different to the first four. Does Wyatt make the language of this last stanza different to what has come before?

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