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# Growth and development of the sonnet in England in the sixteenth century

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

THESIS

THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SONNET IN  
ENGLAND IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Submitted by  
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Scorn not the sonnet; critic you have frowned,  
Mindless of its just honors; with this key  
Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody  
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;  
A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;  
With it Camolus soothed an exile's grief;  
The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf  
Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned

His visionary brow: a glow-worm lamp,  
It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land  
To struggle through dark ways; and, when a damp  
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand  
The Thing became a trumpet, whence he blew  
Soul animating strains--alas, too few!

William Wordsworth

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1.

INTRODUCTION

WATER BOND  
FALCON BOND  
FRAGILE BOND

## INTRODUCTION

In the glamour and romance of the sixteenth century which reached its zenith in the Elizabethan Age of literature, the sonnet appears as one of the most delightful forms of poetry. Its polished style, coupled with the refined language and delicate expression of an ideal, and its general appeal to the aesthetic must ever bring to mind a Land of Heart's Desire where everything from sublime joy to deepest grief is enhanced by a halo of perfection that glorifies it beyond any other form of poetry. In the sonnet the inherent spirit of the muse soars to the highest and noblest heights where it reigns supreme as a thing of surpassing beauty through the ages.

Because of the dependence of the English poets of the sixteenth century upon their predecessors, and because the English sonnet is an imported product of art from Italy and France, considerable study was made of the earliest foundations of the form and the contributions made by the different writers whose works were translated and imitated in England. Without such a background of study, no real understanding of the English sonnet and its development can be attained.

The sixteenth century saw the first arrival of the sonnet in England although it was a form known on the continent for more than three centuries before. It was by the achievements of the great poets of the period that the later English writers patterned their sonnets, using the earlier English masters as models as in turn the sixteenth century men had studied the

great Italian and French sonneteers.

To begin the study, the main question, "How did the sonnet grow and develop in England in the sixteenth century?" was subdivided as follows:

1. What is a sonnet?
2. How and where did it originate?
3. What subjects may properly constitute the content of a sonnet?
4. To whom does England owe the development of the form known as the English sonnet?
5. How much did English poets borrow from their predecessors in Italy and France?
6. What individual contributions to the development of the sonnet form were made by the sixteenth century poets in England?

In order to illustrate and clarify in the mind of the reader the points brought out in the discussion, several sonnets have been quoted in full from the writings of the poets, both major and minor, included in the study.

THE ORIGIN OF THE SONNET

FRANCIS & TAYLOR  
LONDON  
1880

## THE ORIGIN OF THE SONNET

So far as has been discovered the sonnet has always been considered as a form, a pattern or mould convenient and suitable for the expression of "intense but inexpansive" poetical emotion. <sup>1</sup>

Other than the fact that it belongs to southern Europe, the place of its origin is not known for a certainty although there are theories convincing enough, taken separately, to place it in one of three countries respectively--Greece, Provence or Italy.

In support of the idea that it began in Greece, it bears some resemblance to the Greek epigram which was originally an inscription and later came to include verses expressing with the terseness of an inscription a striking and beautiful thought. <sup>2</sup> Like the epigram the sonnet is short and its idea is well expressed but there the similarity ends.

In its distinct separation of parts it is not unlike the Greek choral ode which some suppose to be the parent of the regular Italian sonnet. <sup>3</sup>

Another authority says that the sonnet was a product of the early Italian Renaissance -- a period when the crafts of the goldsmith, the painter and the poet were plied with equal care and skill. <sup>4</sup>

1. T. W. H. Crosland, The English Sonnet, p.5

2. Encyclopaedia Britannica

3. Charles Tomlinson, The Sonnet, p.5

4. Jay B. Hubbell and John O. Beaty, an Introduction to Poetry  
p.269

The generally accepted theory is that it originated in Provence, as did almost all forms of Italian poetry, and made its first appearance at the beginning of the twelfth century in Italy. <sup>1</sup> Much of the poetry which came from the Provencal troubadours was highly affected and monotonous revealing, in place of human nature, merely a passing literary fashion wherein extravagant praise of the fair sex was the most popular theme. It is interesting to us now only from the point of view that it is old. <sup>2</sup>

Wherever the land of its origin may have been--Greece, Italy, or Provence--all are agreed that the sonnet first riveted the attention of the master poets by its form and structure. More than any other type of poetry it is limited and exacting in its demands therefore calling forth the utmost exercise of genius in its composition if it is to be the thing of perfect beauty it is intended.

The musical quality, so essentially a part of it, is in keeping with the very name "sonnet" which like the composition called a "sonata" is derived from being "sounded" i.e. accompanied by a musical instrument. <sup>3</sup> Originally the sonnet was never without such accompaniment and when the connection

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1. Leigh Hunt, *The Book of the Sonnet*, Chapter II
  2. Charles Tomlinson, *The Sonnet*
  3. Leigh Hunt, *The Book of the Sonnet*, Chapter II

finally ceased, the poem retained much of its musical quality making it the more artistic, while logic played a voluntary part in setting the rules for its construction. The music of the lines should be as sweet, strong and varied as possible with different tones discernible in the major and minor portions as in music. The tones and cadences perceive questions and replies. It is not above all a mere play of words and rhymes, but a musical composition, as well as poetry of the highest order. The fourteen line arrangement became, therefore, not a rule by mere chance but an harmonious necessity because of its close resemblance to the sister art--music.<sup>1</sup>

One cause of the persistence of the sonnet in Italy lay in the stimulus which all lyric poetry received from the invention and dissemination of modern music. The composers in search for words for their part songs borrowed freely from the sonnets of Petrarch and his followers. In doing this they prolonged the glory of the sonnet at home and abroad for the songs of the French and the English were adapted from the Italian in both words and music.<sup>2</sup>

The sonnet belongs essentially to the highest poetry because of its uncompromising and exacting nature. It demands strictest adherence to its fundamental laws as to its structure in addition to thought and expression of the highest and

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1. Leigh Hunt, *The Book of the Sonnet*, Chapter II  
2. Sidney Lee, *Elizabethan Sonnets*

noblest degree. Thus it taxes the utmost powers of the poets who, within limited bounds, must give expression to the deepest emotions of the heart. No poem can be truly great without such emotional appeal, but the perfection aimed at in sonnet writing, even though it may fall short of being attained, makes the legitimate sonnet after the Italian fashion truly poetry of such incomparable beauty that it goes unsurpassed in the literary world.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SONNET IN ITALY

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SONNET IN ITALY

Captain Henry Napier has described the Italian language as being "replete with beauty.....adapted to deepest pathos and loftiest flights of poetry....." <sup>1</sup> Equipped as they were with a language that had such powers of expression, and being by nature a people capable of high emotional impulses, it is not to be wondered that practically everybody from poets to mechanics and soldiers wrote sonnets among the men, while women, whose delicate fancies are wont to stray along the paths of romance, found the sonnet an intriguing form in which to give voice to their sentiments, either real or artificial but none the less beautiful compared to those of their masculine contemporaries.

As a form the sonnet has advantages that give it particular prestige in poetic arts.

(1) It is versatile as to subject. Love, laughter, lamentation, description, rebuke, admiration and prayer are proper themes.

(2) The tone of a sonnet may be light, serious, humble or exalted.

(3) Its brevity adds force and makes it popular with the readers.

(4) If one is seeking fame, the production of one really fine sonnet may procure repute for the writer. <sup>2</sup>

1. Leigh Hunt, The Book of the Sonnet, Chapter I

2. Ibid

Thus it is that the sonnet holds a particular fascination for all who are interested in the mysteries of fine poetry from either the point of view of the reader or of the writer.

The exact date of the origin of the sonnet is as obscure as the place of its birth but the majority of critics agree in placing it in the thirteenth century. It was then that Fra Guittone d'Arezzo (? - 1294) "the only begetter of the sonnet as we know it" laid down the first laws.

(1) The sonnet must have an unitary character.

(2) There must be an octave with rhymes a b b a

a b b a

(3) There must be a sestet in which while some variation is allowed the final couplet is excluded.

(4) There must be a distinct break between the octave and the sestet and the first quatrain should be marked off from the second but in lesser degree. <sup>1</sup>

This is the foundation of the regular Italian form of the sonnet, the object of which was to express just one idea, feeling, mood, or proposition. It is a poem of regular construction. The octave has two quatrains the first of which introduces the theme and the second brings it to a full point. The sestet likewise is divided into two tercets having distinct parts to play. The first tercet confirms the idea and the second concludes it. Because a final couplet destroyed from the

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1. Encyclopediae Britannica

individuality of the tercets, it was banned from the legitimate Italian form although it gained considerable favor with the English poets, notably Shakespeare. <sup>1</sup>

In his History of English Poetry, <sup>2</sup> W. J. Courthope gives an interesting explanation of the avoidance of the final couplet by the Italian poets. The first eight lines contain the premises of a poetical syllogism. The last six descend to a conclusion. As the two divisions are unequal in length, it was deemed necessary to make the sestet more individualized. In the octave, expression of thought is massed and condensed by repudiation of sound and general movement limited by the quatrains. In the sestet, clauses are separated by alternate rhymes, the movement is measured by tercets, and the weight of rhetorical emphasis is thrown into the last line.

The Italian sonnets may be classified in three divisions according to the variations of rhyme used in the sestet.

- (1) a b b a      a b b a      c d e c d e  
 (2) a b b a      a b b a      c d c d c d  
 (3) a b b a      a b b a      c d e d c e <sup>3</sup>

Of these three, the first arrangement of the sestet is regarded as the normal or legitimate type although the other two forms are about as numerous in the works of the poets.

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1. Charles Tomlinson, *The Sonnet*  
 2. W. J. Courthope, *History of English Poetry*, Vol. II, p.91  
 3. Charles Tomlinson, *The Sonnet*

The legitimate sonnet after the Italian fashion, which stands as a model for the sonneteers of all succeeding ages and was studied and worked upon by the English poets of the sixteenth century, is marked by the following characteristics:

- (1) The octave contains two rhymes; the sestet contains three.
- (2) It confines itself to one leading idea.
- (3) It treats this one leading idea so as to leave in the reader's mind no sense of irrelevancy or insufficiency.
- (4) It has no speck of obscurity.
- (5) It has no forced rhyme.
- (6) It has no superfluous word.
- (7) It has no word too little (omission for the sake of convenience).
- (8) It has no word out of place.
- (9) It has no long word or one tending to lessen the number of accents and weaken the verse.
- (10) Its rhymes are varied and contrasted, not beat on the same vowel (i. e. tide, abide).
- (11) The music throughout is varied as it is suitable, strong or sweet. It is never weak or monotonous.
- (12) It increases in interest to the close.
- (13) The close is equally impressive and unaffected, not epigrammatic. It is simple, conclusive and satisfactory. <sup>1</sup>

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1. Leigh Hunt, *The Book of the Sonnet*, Chapter II

After Guittone d'Arezzo, Dante (1265-1321) was the first sonneteer of historic interest. So far as expression and feeling are concerned his sonnets surpass those of Petrarch. His imagination seems to be more vivid and highly developed than that of any other poet in the world. When his religious and political fervor did not get out of hand, he was not only a profound thinker and observer but extremely tender and affectionate. If he had written as many sonnets and had as thoroughly applied his faculties, he, instead of Petrarch, might have been the one to establish the model for succeeding ages in the art of sonnet writing. As it was he made the inner spirit more beautiful and superior to the outer spirit with a degree of ease and grace not to be emulated by Petrarch.

The form which Dante used shows rare mastery of metrical effect and great regularity. In six of his sonnets he used the final rhyming couplet showing that thus early there were departures from the first governing laws. Petrarch likewise shows the same irregularity in seven of his sonnets but this is the exception rather than the rule in the Italian form and the poets of England who made so much of the final couplet in the sixteenth century were definitely separating themselves from the Italian masters by doing so.

Dante and Petrarch set the pace for the later sonneteers not only in form but in theme. Their favorite subject, like that of the troubadours, was ideal love. It is even supposed that Petrarch was the inventor of that kind of love poetry

which exalts itself and its object without depending on the passions except in so far as love must have the character of a human passion. <sup>1</sup>

Petrarch was affected by the age of chivalry, and chivalry exalted the being and condition of woman into something divine. No longer was the lady hidden away from the world in the seclusion of her own home. She came forth into the society of men as a modern hostess. In her presence nothing but the most refined expression must dominate the language and only subjects that suggested aesthetic idealism were suitable for discussion in her hearing. Whatever she may have been in reality, she was placed on a pedestal and regarded as a goddess of beauty, purity and chastity by the gentlemen of her world. Her physical perfection was only one of her charms. The ideal lady was a person of grace, elegance and good sense, having a cultivated mind. To her, love was the most interesting subject and for her, sonnets were written--perhaps to be whispered in her ear in a moonlit garden or slipped into her hand as she leaned from her balcony. <sup>2</sup> Few of these ever attained the perfection of art that constitutes the best of the sonnets although as a conventional mode of love making, practically everyone, great and small, tried his talents to the utmost in their composition.

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1. Charles Tomlinson, *The Sonnet*

2. John M. Berdan, *Early Tudor Poetry*, p. 458

Sometimes the lady of the sonnet had no counterpart in actual life. She was often the creation of an active imagination comprising all the qualities that the writer might admire in the ideal woman. In any case, real or make-believe, she was a fitting subject for some of the loftiest flights of poetic expression.

Dante had two loves--one Beatrice and one philosophy representing sensual and intellectual love respectively.<sup>1</sup> He reveals the living loveable qualities of Beatrice dwelling upon her moral grace and influence far more than he extols her physical beauty. In this he is superior to Petrarch who places his lady, the lovely Laura, so far above and beyond earthly perfections as to make her an unreality. According to his lavish and extravagant praise her beauty was something to be envied by Venus, while her charms had such a magical influence upon nature that the sun in the heavens, though dazzling with brightness at its rising, became dim when Laura woke and moved.

Such exaggerations wove a spell around his successors and became the theme of much artificiality in the writings of the many imitators, including English poets, who blotted out the sincerity of emotion by these over expansive elaborations.

There are several theories concerning the identity of Laura. She may have been an ideal creation of the poet to

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1. Charles Tomlinson, *The Sonnet*

stimulate his genius; she may have personified virtue, science or philosophy; she may have been a guise for the author's worship of the Virgin Mary; and one of his own contemporaries accused him of concealing his desire for the laurel with which poets were crowned, under the woman's name Laura. <sup>1</sup>

Whoever or whatever she was in reality, she was the subject of all the various phases of love including its joys, despairs and regrets which made a strong appeal. Whether real or feigned, his love for "Laura" as expressed in his famous sonnets has become a literary legend. The very vagueness of *The* description of her was an advantage, in that the lover could thereby visualize his own lady the more easily when reading the impassioned sonnets of Petrarch. Throughout his sonnets Petrarch's out pourings are personal to himself, and therein his greatness gives way to that of Dante who enlists the sympathies of humanity in his portrayal of Beatrice as an earthly woman of superior quality.

The Platonic idea of love, which had been introduced into Italy by the Fathers of the Church, had a powerful effect upon the poets of the period. Love as a strong desire for the beautiful is the basis of this theory. It is illustrated by Dante and Petrarch and was known to Spenser and Shakespeare in England. <sup>2</sup>

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1. Charles Tomlinson, *The Sonnet*

2. *Ibid.*

"Petrarchismo" was the name given to the art of feigning love for an imaginary person and relating the story of amorous intrigue. This began about a century later, and in their attempts to extol some womanly idol, who was at one and the same time the sweetest and cruellest of her sex, the imitators of Petrarch turned the whole art of sonnet writing into a ridiculous farce.

Petrarch worked hard and long on his sonnets. They were not mere trifles dashed off at random. His contributions include:

- (1.) A musical quality superior to that of Dante.
- (2.) Freedom from the crudity and metaphysics of preceding times.
- (3.) Refinement of expression.

Sonnet CCLXI is a good example of Petrarch's type--the type that became the model for the earliest sonneteers both as to form and theme.

On wings of thought I soared to regions where  
 She whom I seek, but here on earth in vain  
 Dwells among those who the third heaven gain  
 And saw her lovelier and less haughty there.  
 She took my hand and said--"In the bright sphere,  
 Unless my wish deceive, we meet again  
 Lo, I am she who gave the strife and pain  
 And closed my day before the eve was near.  
 My bliss no human thought can understand  
 I wait for thee alone--my fleshly veil  
 So loved by thee, is the grave retained."  
 She ceased, Ah why! And why let loose my hand!  
 Such chaste and tender words could so prevail.  
 A little more, I had in heaven remained. 1

After Petrarch the popularity of the sonnet declined, and not until the sixteenth century did his influence reveal itself in its full capacity, when it became the highest ambition of the Italian poets to excel as sonneteers. In the later decades, which seemed to mark the height of the golden age, the sonnet again rose to prominence.

Giovanni della Casa, a contemporary of Sir Thomas Wyatt, was the first after Petrarch to give the form any definite improvement. He broke up the flow of his lines and introduced words and thoughts more remarkable for strength than for sweetness. He did not keep the quatrains and tercets distinct but he had exalted qualities of expression, imagination, and grandeur that gave impetus to the entire movement in the sixteenth century. It is said that he roughened it purposely because it had grown too sweet. <sup>1</sup>

Angelo de Costanzo restored the logical Italian form but his weakness lay in the elaborate conceits and epigrammatical conclusions which he used extensively in his sonnets. <sup>2</sup>

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1. Leigh Hunt, *The Book of the Sonnet*, Chapter IV  
2. *Ibid.*

THE SONNET IN FRANCE

## THE SONNET IN FRANCE

In France, no less than in Italy, the prominence of the sonnet in the sixteenth century was paramount. It was the fashion of the age, and as the conditions that called them forth were similar in both countries so the poems themselves bear a striking resemblance. As John M. Berdan has stated, "It was a social convention without deep feeling. The age of chivalry had passed but there yet remained the literary tradition of the cruel lady and the longing lover. There is little more emotion in these trifles than in the verses for St. Valentine's Day; it was good form to have a bleeding heart." <sup>1</sup>

In the French sonnets as in the Italian, it is the lady that has the lover's heart but in Wyatt's sonnets the condition is just reversed.

Both Melin de St. Gelais (1487-1558) and Clement Marot (1497-1544) claim the honor of bringing the Petrarchan sonnet from Italy in the third and fourth decades of the century. Sidney Lee <sup>2</sup> holds the opinion that priority rightly belongs to Marot, who in the detached sonnet in honor of a dignitary of Lyons in 1529, touched a Petrarchan note for the first time in France. This was followed shortly afterwards by his translations of six sonnets directly from Petrarch.

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1. John M. Berdan, *Early Tudor Poetry*, p. 448  
 2. Sidney Lee, *Elizabethan Sonnets*

Another authority, John M. Berdan,<sup>1</sup> says that in 1547 St. Gelais published one edition in which one sonnet appeared. The inference was made that this one was the first sonnet to be written in French but modern scholarship has shown that Marot had published sonnets much earlier.

St. Gelais was a typical courtier and Wyatt in his various embassies in all probability knew him personally. Three of his poems show a striking resemblance to those of the French poet.<sup>2</sup> One of them is the following sonnet.

Like to these unmeasurable mountains,  
 Is my painful life the burden of ire;  
 For of great height be they, and high is my desire;  
 And I of tears, and they be full of fountains;  
 Under craggy rocks they have full barren plains,  
 Hard thoughts in me my woeful mind doth tire;  
 Small fruit and many leaves their tops do attire,  
 Small effect with great trust in me remains.  
 The boisterous winds oft their high boughs do blast,  
 Hot sighs from me continually be shed;  
 Cattle in them, and in me love is fed;  
 Immovable am I, and they are full steadfast;  
 Of that restless birds they have the tune and note,<sup>3</sup>  
 And I always plaints that pass through my throat.

After the death of Marot, the development in France was promoted by Ronsard and six of his friends who were already familiar with the work of Marot and St. Gelais and bent their energies to adapting the best types of foreign literature to the French language. They assumed the title "La Pleiade" and took the sonnet from Italy as the characteristic of their school.

1. John M. Berdan, *Early Tudor Poetry*, p. 451

2. *Ibid.* p. 450

3. George Reuben Potter, *Elizabethan Verse and Prose*, p. 3-4

Joachim du Bellay, an ardent admirer of Petrarch, urged his countrymen to write sonnets after the mode set by the Italian masters. His enthusiasm was sufficient to carry through the idea of practising the same thought of the Greek, Latin, and Italian poets in the French language. Petrarch appealed to them more strongly than any other and so in France they transplanted and established his favorite and most renowned form of writing,--the sonnet. Like him, they idealized beauty and indulged a glowing imagination which filled their lives with a tiresome chain of flowers, glorified love, and colorful beauties of nature. No spontaneous expression of real emotion can be found in anything they wrote. They clung tenaciously to form and artistry suppressing every feeling that might detract from its perfection. Thus their sonnets are studied forms of art, so very formal as to be utterly cold and lifeless compared to the warmth of feeling expressed in those they tried to imitate.<sup>1</sup>

After one studies the structure and themes of Italian sonnets he finds nothing new revealed in the study of the French, numerous as they were in the sixteenth century.

Ronsard, with the superior gift for lyric writing, published nearly a thousand sonnets, most of them being sequences of an amorous theme. Du Bellay produced a long series of political and metaphysical sonnets collected under the names "Regrets"

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1. Sidney Lee, Elizabethan Sonnets

and "Antiquite's de Rome". De Baif wrote sonnets addressing imaginary mistresses, friends and patrons. The examples set by these three were emulated by a host of followers. <sup>1</sup>

In the last part of the century, Philippe Desportes, (1546-1606) a fashionable ecclesiastic, is noted for a fluency in writing sonnets that surpasses everyone in literature but there his fame rests, for everything he wrote was so artificial that true lovers of poetry turned away from it. <sup>2</sup>

In the last years "La Pleiade" became content with literal translations of Italian poets. They seemed to think that the Italian sonnet was so highly perfected that it could not be improved. Du Bellay's own sonnets contain the idea that his art is so inferior to that of Petrarch that although his lady has all the charms of Laura he is unable to do her justice.

To summarize the French influence upon the English sonnet, it is fair to say that it served only as a powerful stimulus acting upon the enthusiasm for it as a form of poetry. After Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey had introduced the sonnet from Italy into England, the interest in it declined for a while. Later in the century in the six year period from 1591 to 1597 it came to the front again as one of the most popular forms. This was due largely to French rather than Italian influence, but the French sonneteers were imitators and ardent admirers rather than original contributors in either form or theme. <sup>3</sup>

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1. Sidney Lee, Elizabethan Sonnets

2. Ibid

3. Ibid (v)

WARSON'S  
FALCON-BOND  
PAPER CONTENT

INTRODUCTION IN ENGLAND

## INTRODUCTION OF THE SONNET IN ENGLAND

In England the sonnet never really became assimilated in the national literature. However much the poets tried to naturalize it, it always remained an import. <sup>1</sup> The English language by its very nature is not so easily adaptable to the form as the Italian language which is notably more musical.

It is strange that such a poet as Chaucer took no definite part in introducing the sonnet to his countrymen. His remarkable poetic abilities together with his intimate knowledge of Italian poetry and the probability that he was personally acquainted with Petrarch all point to promising developments that he might have made to the form in England, but the fact remains that he alone of all the great English poets left us no sonnet whatsoever. The reasons for this may have been (1) that his interests leaned more toward those of the Anglo-Norman Court which he served than they did toward his Italian ventures (2) that the sonnets of Dante and Petrarch had not found a sufficiently interested English audience (3) that his field lay in narration and character rather than in lyrical poetry as his lyrics are few and trifling. <sup>2</sup>

Although he was not a sonneteer, the influence he exerted upon the English language is not to be disregarded as a contribution in the story of the development of the sonnet.

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1. Charles Tomlinson, *The Sonnet*

2. Leigh Hunt, *The Book of the Sonnet*, Chapter VI

He introduced the elaborate French metres and the scientific use of the iambic movement in his verses of ten or twelve syllables thereby refining the mixed language rising out of the Saxon and Norman. In his poetry we also notice a pause in the middle of the lines as well as at the end. This, used by later disciples and imitators came to be more or less mechanical but the English ear became tuned to it and it was the metrical instrument that Sir Thomas Wyatt used when he tried to reproduce the harmony of the Italian sonnet in English. <sup>1</sup>

During the reign of Henry the Eighth the influence of Italian poetry made itself distinctly felt and opened the way for the outburst of sonneteering that followed in the Elizabethan period through French instigation. Even as early as Henry's time the English Court was influenced by France. Francis the First had changed the state of letters by mixing gallantry with learning and admitting ladies to his court. Henry the Eighth vied with Francis in these gaieties and poetry naturally accompanied these refinements. <sup>2</sup>

The reigns of Edward VI and Mary were too tragic to permit much literary development but with the beginning of Elizabeth's reign there began another era of gaiety in which the queen played an important part. Her love of the pageantry of chivalry and the medieval romances furnished a suitable background for

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1. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II  
 2. Thomas Warton, History of English Poetry Vol. III, p. 22

the new interest in sonnet writing and during her reign some of the greatest strides in furthering the art on English soil were made. The worship of the female sex gave plenty of theme material for the most ardent of love poetry and the sonnet became a fitting mode of expression for emotions either real or fancied. The queen herself made a big contribution through her own love of learning which modified the English taste from its love of the chivalrous court of her father to an equal degree of fondness for her own romantic court. <sup>1</sup>

The general characteristics of the queen were reflected in her people throughout the reign and were favorable to the development of the sonnet in no small way. They were noted for initiative, ingenuity, and fertility of ideas which qualities gave rise to the genius of such men as Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and the incomparable William Shakespeare who bear out the justice of the popular acclaim that this was the "golden age" of literature. <sup>2</sup> Even the less renowned poets were superior masters of the art and it is little wonder that they experimented with and added innovations to such an intriguing form of lyricism as the sonnet of Petrarch.

For a while the form was exploited and used as a modern love letter or valentine. In the latter part of the century it was even commercialized as merchantable ware. Michael

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1. W. J. Courthope, *A History of English Poetry*, Vol. II, Ch. V  
2. Reuben Post Halleck, *New English Literature*, p. 121

Drayton, a poet of no small ability, was employed to write a sonnet which actually won the lady for his client. <sup>1</sup>

In the poetry written in English there are in the order of importance three main types of sonnet: the Italian (or Petrarchan), the Shakespearean, and the Spenserian. The first receives its name from the fact that it was used by Petrarch and other Italian poets. Each of the other two types takes its name from the famous English poet who made an extended use of it. <sup>2</sup>

All of the poets who came to be the masters of the form in England owed a large share of their greatness to the work of their predecessors, Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey, especially the latter who came to be known as the "Father of the English Sonnet." <sup>3</sup>

The individual contributions of each of these earliest English sonneteers will be considered separately.

#### SIR THOMAS WYATT (1503-1542)

Wyatt was born in the same year as the Italian poet, Casa, who roughened the sonnet purposely because he thought it had grown too sweet. During his travels in Italy after he left college in 1520, it is possible that the young English poet fell under the influence of his Italian contemporary for

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1. Reuben Post Halleck, *New English Literature*, p. 135
  2. Hubbel and Beaty, *An Introduction to Poetry*, p. 269
  3. Charles Tomlinson, *The Sonnet*

certainly his first sonnets, which were the first to be written in English, were as rough as if poetry itself had just come into being. Weightiness of matter prevails over elegance of form in his poetry which is a characteristic not suitable to the sonnet that he tried to naturalize.

One authority says, "I am of the opinion that he mistook his talents when in compliance with the mode he became a sonneteer. His abilities were seduced and misapplied in fabricating fine speeches to an obdurate mistress." <sup>1</sup>

That he was unaware of the secret principle underlying the structure of the Italian sonnet and was misled by other Italian forms, for example the "Strambotti" of Serafino that he admired, is evident in his sonnets.

Two marked and contrary features distinguish his poetry: (1) individual energy of thought, (2) imitation of foreign models. He was a man of many moods and ideas and was most successful as a poet when he allowed his genius to go its own way unhampered by the confining regulations of the Italian sonnets. Of the thirty-one sonnets that he composed only nine are apparently the product of original thought and none of them show any mark of inspiration. They are the work of a man who was impressed with the beautiful and ingenious form of the sonnet <sup>and sought</sup> to reproduce it in a language that was not sufficiently refined for it. <sup>2</sup>

1. Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry*, Vol. III, p. 49

2. W. J. Courthope, *A History of English Poetry*, Vol. II, p. 52

The first English poem constructed on the Petrarchan principle is fairly crude but it has formal interest. It opens with the proper Petrarchan octet followed by close rhyme and a rhymed couplet.

Cesar, when that the traytor of Egipt,  
 With thonerable bed did him present,  
 Covering his gladnesse, did represent  
 Playnt with his teres outward, as it is with spit  
 And Hannyball, else, when fortune him  
 Cleve from his reign, and from all his intent  
 Laught to his folke, whom sorrowe did torment,  
 His cruel dispite for to disgorge and quit.  
 So chaunceth it oft, that every passion  
 The mind hideth, by color contrary,  
 With fayned visage now sad, now mery:  
 Whereby if I laught, any time or season  
 It is: for bicause I have nother way  
 To cloke my care, but under sport and play. 1

Wyatt experimented with the Italian form jotting down the readiest English equivalent. His model does not, as the Italian, put down the idea in the octave and balance it in the sestette. 2

An example of his style is to be found in this sonnet which is a rendering of Petrarch's.

My galley charged with forgetfulness,  
 Through sharp seas in winter nights doth pass  
 'Tween rock and rock; and eke mine enemy alas!  
 That is my lord steereth with cruelness:  
 At every oar, a thought in readiness;  
 As though that death were light in such a case.  
 An endless wind doth tear the sail apace  
 Of forced sighs, and trusty fearfulness.  
 A rain of tears, a cloud of dark disdain,  
 Hath done the wearied cords great hindrance  
 Wreathed with error and eke with ignorance.

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1. T. W. H. Crosland, The English Sonnet  
 2. Ernest Rhys, Lyric Poetry

The stars be hid that led me to the pain;  
 Drowned is reason that should me consort  
 And I remain despairing of the port. 1

Here we find some of the faults common in Wyatt's sonnets. There is the forced rhyme in the use of the word "cruelness", and the inverted word order for the sake of the rhyme in the concluding couplet. Moreover there are combinations of trochaic and iambic measures that are not good.

David Main offers some kindly criticism regarding the language irregularities.

"In reading the poetry of this time it is necessary to remember that the language was somewhat unsettled and arbitrary. But if the more ordinary variances from modern practice be kept in view--the tendency of the accent to fall towards the end, rather than the beginning of words, especially those of recent acquisition; and the frequent necessity of giving such words as passion, impatient, etc., the value of three and four syllables respectively--Wyatt and Surrey's metre will be found comparatively regular." 2

Wyatt's fondness for the form of the sonnet was probably caused by a certain metaphysical turn of thought that made him imitate those of Petrarch which were outstanding for their ingenuity of sentimental logic. 3

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1. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II p. 52
  2. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 238
  3. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II, Ch. II

In criticizing his poetry, Thomas Warton says:

"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 envelops the stars, reason is drowned, and the haven is at a distance... Sometimes it is as a gun which being over charged expands the flame within itself, and bursts in pieces.....In another of his sonnets he says that all nature sympathizes 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." <sup>1</sup>

Tradition has it that Wyatt was in love with Anne Boleyn but circumstances surrounding it seem to disprove any immoral attachment. The story rests partly on inference from expressions in his poems playing upon his mistress' name after the manner of Petrarch. One is addressed "To His Love Called Anna" and in another there is a reference to a royal lover. In any case the fact remains that Anne was beheaded in 1536 and Wyatt was sent to Spain as His Majesty's Ambassador in 1537. It was certainly not in keeping with King Henry's character to thus reward a serious rival in love.

Like the troubadours whose poetry furnished the groundwork of the style of the Petrarchists, Wyatt was inclined to exaggerate his sentiment all out of reason. But the manliness

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1. Thomas Warton, History of English Poetry, Vol. III p. 45

which was one of his distinguishing characteristics constantly revolted against the servility of the male lover which the code of chivalry expected. In those sonnets that he translated he thus gave an original turn. In one sonnet he protests that he will renounce his mistress in consequence of her injustice. Some consider this one to be his best. <sup>1</sup>

"My love to scorn, my service to retain,  
 Therein, methought, she used cruelty,  
 Since with good will I lost my liberty,  
 To follow her which causeth all my pain.  
 Might never care cause me for to refrain,  
 But only this which is extremity,  
 Giving me nought, alas! nor to agree  
 That as I was her man, I might remain.  
 But since that thus ye list to order me,  
 That would have been your servant true and fast,  
 Displease thee not, my dotting days be past;  
 And with my loss to leave I must agree.  
 For as there is a certain time to rage,  
 So is there time such madness to assuage. <sup>2</sup>

The idea of justice in love is not found commonly in troubadour poetry but is the keynote of Wyatt's. For the expression of so ardent a feeling the sonnet with its elaborate structure was not a good vehicle. His best poems are written in simple metrical forms. Almost all of his love poetry was written for the accompaniment of the lute which accounts for the musical quality in it. <sup>3</sup>

All in all Wyatt's art was not equal to his imagination and his one important contribution to the English sonnet was

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1. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II p. 54  
 2. Ibid.  
 3. Ibid. p. 55

his introduction of the Italian form in his own country. The Earl of Surrey improved upon it.

THE EARL OF SURREY (1516-1547)

"Wyat 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." <sup>1</sup>

Wyatt's difficulty lay in his misunderstanding of the principle of the Italian sonnet and by partly following it and partly neglecting it he produced a muddle. Surrey was wiser and abandoned it altogether producing sonnets of three quatrains and a final couplet which, although a radical departure from the Italian form, became the established pattern in England during the sixteenth century. It was inferior to the Petrarchan sonnet in its musical value, <sup>2</sup> but it had a beauty of its own superior to that of Wyatt.

Love that liveth and reigneth in my thought,  
 That built his seat within my captive breast;  
 Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought,  
 Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.  
 She that me taught to love and suffer pain,  
 My doubtful hope and eke my hot desire  
 With shamefac'd cloak to shadow and restrain,  
 Her smiling grace converteth straight to ire.

1. Thomas Warton, History of English Poetry, Vol. III p. 42  
 2. T. Earle Welby, Popular History of English Poetry

And coward Love then to the heart space  
 Taketh his flight; whereas he lurks, and plains  
 His purpose lost, and dare not show his face,

For my Lord's quiet thus faultless bide I pains  
 Yet from my Lord shall not my foot remove;  
 Sweet is his death that takes his end by love.

Compared to Petrarch, Surrey's sentiments were more natural and unaffected containing no learned allusions or elaborate conceits. If he copied Petrarch, it was Petrarch's better manner and he stands as the first polite writer of love verses in the English language. His sonnets were inspired by genuine passion, unaffected dictates of nature and love. He introduced the refinement of breaking the line with pauses to avoid the monotony of the iambic measure and varied the situation of the pause as the harmony of the verse required or the beauty and effect of the passage would be heightened by it.<sup>1</sup>

Surrey's life throws light on the character and subject of his poetry. As a young nobleman at the King's court "he was the child of Henry's affection."<sup>2</sup>

It is not known when he began his travels but he made the tour of Europe in the true spirit of chivalry, proclaimed the charms of his mistress and prepared to defend her cause.

"He studied with great success a critical knowledge of the Italian tongue and that he might give new lustre to the name of Geraldine attained a just taste for the peculiar graces of Italian poetry."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Francis J. Child, *British Poets*, Wyatt and Surrey  
 2. Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry*, Vol. III, p. 22  
 3. *Ibid.* p. 26

When he returned home, called for some idle reason of the king he was "the most elegant traveller, the most polite lover, the most learned nobleman, and the most accomplished gentleman of his age." <sup>1</sup>

His growing popularity with the people brought him disfavor from the king which finally ended in death on the scaffold in 1547. <sup>2</sup>

"Surrey, for his justness of thought, correctness of style and purity of expression, may justly be pronounced the first English classical poet. He unquestionably is the first polite writer of love verses in our language. It must, however, be allowed, that there is striking native beauty in some of our love-verses written much earlier than Surrey's. But in the most savage ages and countries, rude nature has taught elegance to the lover." <sup>3</sup>

His love poetry preserves the chivalrous traditions of the troubadours but his style is his chief poetical value. Nearly all of his poems deal with the subject of Love. The legend of his devotion to the Fair Geraldine is a tradition that has taken deep root in literature. The source of this lies in a story by Nash, "Jack Wilton!" <sup>4</sup> It is said that she lived in Florence, Italy and was of the family of the Gherardi of that city. Thomas Warton says, "She was undoubtedly one of the

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1. Thomas Warton, History of English Poetry, Vol. III, p. 26

2. Ibid. p. 27

3. Ibid. p. 41

4. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II, Ch. III

daughters of Gerald Fitzgerald, Earl of Kildare." <sup>1</sup>

Surrey himself says:

From Tuscan came my lady's worthy race;  
 Fair Florence was sometime her ancient seat;  
 The western isle, whose pleasant shore doth face  
 Wild Chambar's cliffs, did give her lively heat;  
 Fostered she was with milk of Irish breast;  
 Her sire an earl, her dame of princes' blood;  
 From tender years in Britain she doth rest,  
 With a king's child, where she tastes costly food;  
 Honsdon did first present her to mine eyen;  
 Bright is her hue, and Geraldine she hight;  
 Hampton me taught to wish her first for mine;  
 And Windson, alas! doth chase me from her sight.  
 Beauty of kind, her virtues from above, <sup>2</sup>  
 Happy is he that may obtain her love.

This is obscure and indirect but it seems to coincide with the story of one Elisabeth Fitzgerald, a second cousin to Mary and Elizabeth of England, who was educated at Honsdon with them. Surrey then lived at Windsor. He was first fascinated by her at Hampton Court. <sup>3</sup>

According to David Main the majority of Surrey's sonnets like Wyatt's are either translations of Petrarch's or adaptations from them. The following is a close rendering of Petrarch's 113<sup>th</sup>. <sup>4</sup>

"Set me whereas the sun doth parch the green,  
 Or where his beams do not dissolve the ice;  
 In temperate heat where he is felt and seen;  
 In presence prest of people mad or wise;  
 Set me in high or yet in low degree;  
 In longest night, or in the shortest day;  
 In clearest sky or where clouds thickest be;  
 In lusty youth or when my hairs are gray:

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1. Thomas Warton, History of English Poetry, Vol. III, p. 23
  2. George Rueben Potter, Elizabethan Verse and Prose, p. 9
  3. Thomas Warton, History of English Poetry, Vol. III, p. 24
  4. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 239

Set me in heaven, in earth, or else in hell,  
 In hill, or dale, or in the foaming flood;  
 Thrall, or at large, alive whereso I dwell,  
 Sick, or in health, in evil fame, or good,  
 Hers will I be; and only with this thought  
 Content myself, although my chance be nought." 1

As a tribute to the great Italian master there is also a sonnet which was printed in Tottles' Miscellany:

A Praise of Petrarche and Laura His Ladye  
 O Petrarche, head and prince of Poets all,  
 Whose likely gift of flowing eloquence  
 Well may we seeke but find not how or whence,  
 So rare a gift with thee did rise and fall,  
 Peace to thy bones and glory immortall  
 Be to thy name, and to her excellence  
 Whose beautie lightned in thy time and sence,  
 So to be set forth as none other shall  
 Why hath not our penes rimes so perfet wroughte  
 Ne why our time forth bringeth beautie such:  
 To try our wits as golde is by the touch,  
 If to the stile the matter aided ought;  
 But there was never Laura more than one,  
 And her had Petrarch for his Paragone. 2

Of the following, Leigh Hunt says: "This sonnet is complete of its kind. There is not one sentence which does not contain information; not a word too much; no want of increased interest; all is strong simple and affecting." 3

#### AN EPITAPH

Norfolk sprung thee, Lambeth holds thee dead;  
 Clere, of the Count of Cleremont, thou hight;  
 Within the womb of Ormond's race thou bred,  
 And saw'st thy cousin crowned in thy sight.  
 Shelton for love, Surrey for lord thou chase,  
 (Ay me! whilst life did last that league was tender)  
 Tracing whose steps thou sawest Kelsal blaze,

1. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 3
2. Ibid. p. 239
3. Leigh Hunt, Book of the Sonnet, p. 140

Landresy burnt, and battered Boulogne render.  
 At Montreuil gates, hopeless of all recure,  
 Thine earl, half dead, gave in thy hand his will;  
 Which cause did thee this pining death procure,  
 Ere summers four times seven thou couldst fulfil.  
 Ah Clere! if love had booted care or cost  
 Heaven had not won, nor earth so timely lost. <sup>1</sup>

Surrey took such liberties with the Petrarchan pattern that the result was often a pretty poem but not a real sonnet except for the number of lines. <sup>2</sup> For example the following:

The soote season that bud and bloom forth brings,  
 With green hath clad the hill and eke the vale;  
 The nightingale with feathers new she sings,  
 The turtle to her mate hath told her tale.  
 Summer is come, for every spray now springs;  
 That hart hath hung his old head on the pale;  
 The buck in brake his winter coat he flings;  
 The fishes flete with new repaired scale;  
 The adder all her slough away she flings;  
 The swift swallow pursueth the flies smale;  
 The busy bee her honey now she mings;  
 Winter is worn that was the flower's bale.  
 And thus I see, among these pleasant things,  
 Each care decays, and yet my sorrow springs! <sup>3</sup>

This sonnet is rhymed throughout on two sounds and the sweetness of the melodic result cannot be gainsaid but a number of things so rhymed would be trying to the ear.

The important reforms of Surrey in the development of the sonnet are five in number:

1. With regard to the iambic movement of decasyllabic verse: he took care to make the tonic accent fall as a rule on even syllables using a trochee only in the first two syllables of the verse.

2. His verses as a rule contain ten syllables or at least five perfect iambic feet.

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1. David M. Main, *A Treasury of Sonnets*, p. 4  
 2. T. W. H. Crosland, *The English Sonnet*  
 3. *Ibid.*

3. Besides marking clearly the movement of the iambus, he also defined harmoniously the place of the rhythmical pause both in the middle of the verse and at its rhyming close. Usually this pause came after the fourth syllable but occasionally after the fifth.

4. He rejected weak syllables for purposes of rhyme. All of his predecessors had been accustomed to the cheap device of forcing a rhyme, for example flieth and appeareth; or forgetfulness and cruelness; or reason and season as in Wyatt. Surrey avoided the forced rhyme and the double rhyme and selected either full sounding monosyllables or disyllabic words forming a regular iambus. (This was a very important improvement.)

5. He was the first to harmonize English verse in conformity with the requirements of the now fully developed language and also the first to refine the system of poetical diction so as to adapt it to the reformed versification. <sup>1</sup>

Surrey had found the sonnet half mongrel from Wyatt and made it a comely thing. <sup>2</sup>

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1. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II, Ch.III  
2. Ernest Rhys, Lyric Poetry

THE ELIZABETHAN PERIOD  
and  
THE GREAT SONNETEERS

## THE ELIZABETHAN PERIOD

and

## THE GREAT SONNETEERS

The first twenty years of Elizabeth's reign were in a political and literary sense the most barren in the sixteenth century. The old ideals of chivalry were passing away and political uncertainty held sway. The manners of the court known to Wyatt and Surrey were widely separated from the courtliness of Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh. While the mind of the nation passed through this period of transition the poets lacked clear motives of composition. Although Surrey had given them a well tuned instrument, his immediate successors made no attempt to use it. The political courtier still tuned his lute for the ear of his mistress but his songs and sonnets were submitted only to the eyes of a few select and aristocratic judges.

A noticeable feature in the last half of the century was the appearance of several Miscellanies. The first was published by Tottel in June 1557. It contained nearly all the poems that survived Wyatt and Surrey and showed how largely the reforms of Surrey had influenced the poetic taste of the general reader. Wyatt had made but small advance on his predecessors. A comparison of the text of this Miscellany with the Harrington M.S. of Wyatt's poetry proves that the halting verse and harsh collisions of accent which gave no offense to his early readers

were found intolerable by the next generation. <sup>1</sup>

"But daily yet the ill doth change into the worse"  
Harrington MS.

"And daily doth mine ill change to the worse"  
Tottel <sup>2</sup>

In the last half of the century what was known as "Petrarchismo" spread all over Europe. This was an insincere literary fashion based on the imitations of Petrarch. The whole thing according to a French writer M. Pieri, was a make believe passion for a make believe lady that led to some conventional chain of sighs, tears, glorious joy, and regret. He goes on to say, "To succeed in this type, our sixteenth century poets needed only a little learning and imagination, a great deal of memory and a certain ability in the art of composition." <sup>3</sup>

This type is very familiar to the readers of the various Elizabethan sonnet cycles and those who do not understand that biographic details in these sequences are rare believe the poems to be the outpourings of the hearts of the poets.

It is curious to note in the history of the sonnet that so many of them turn upon illegal attachments. Dante, who makes a saint of Beatrice and marries her as it were in heaven, never mentioned her husband. To him she was always the unmarried Beatrice Portinari he first knew. It was the same with Petrarch who ignored the husband of the lady who invited

1. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II, Ch. VI

2. Ibid. p. 146

John Berdan, Early Tudor Poetry, p. 260

the poet to live with her in Paradise after her death. Casa, an ecclesiastic, was likewise supposed to have addressed his love verses to a married lady. In England the same holds true. The "Stella" of Sir Philip Sidney's sonnets was Lady Rich; the mysterious "dark lady" of William Shakespeare was neither Anne Hathaway nor any other member of the poet's household so far as can be determined, and thus it goes throughout the entire vogue of Elizabethan sonneteering. 1

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY (1554-1586)

In Sidney's Arcadia we find one of the finest examples of the English sonnet pure and simple. Some even regard it as his most accomplished attainment:

Who doth desire that chaste his wife should be,  
 First be he true, for truth doth truth deserve;  
 Then such be he, as she his worth may see,  
 And one man still credit with her preserve.  
 Not toying kind, nor causelessly unkind,  
 Not stirring thoughts, nor yet denying right,  
 Not spying faults, nor in plain errors blind;  
 Never hard hand, nor ever reins too light.  
 As far from want, as far from vain expense  
 (The one doth force, the latter doth entice)  
 Allow good company, but keep from thence  
 All filthy mouths that glory in their vice;  
 This done thou hast no more but leave the rest  
 To virtue, fortune, time and woman's breast. 2

Here we find the balance poise and restraint of a perfect piece of art. It appeals to the spirit and to the intellect. It is admirably built and knit and the emotional effect of the final couplet throws radiance over everything that has gone

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1. Leigh Hunt, Book of the Sonnet, Chapter VI  
 2. T. W. H. Crosland, The English Sonnet

before. 1

Another mood of Sidney's romantic idealism is embodied in his Astrophel and Stella, a series of one hundred and ten pieces upon which his reputation as a sonneteer depends. Some critics have supposed these to be the product of **genuine** and irresistible impulse, that they record actual feelings and may even be autobiographical. Charles Lamb was one who favored this theory which is generally contradicted. 2

The whole sequence forms a regular design, the object being to exercise the imagination on a set theme according to the traditional rules. Above all they display "wit" partly in placing a single thought in a number of different lights and partly in decorating it with a vast variety of metaphors.

The scheme of the sonnets on the whole follows a b b a a b b a c d c d e e or c c d e e d. Thus we find a strict Petrarchan octet with either an irregular Petrarchan sestet or a strict Shakespearean sestet, but never a complete sonnet on the Petrarchan scheme. 3

In style he differs from Petrarch in that his love analysis never goes beyond the bounds of fancy, whereas the Italian poet seemed to be really moved by a genuine feeling of tenderness. The following sonnet shows the conceit common to numberless poets of the school--that Love lies in ambush in the eye. Sidney's only addition to the usual convention is

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1. T. W. H. Crosland, *The English Sonnet*
  2. W. J. Courthope, *A History of English Poetry*, Vol. II Ch. VIII
  3. T. W. Crosland, *The English Sonnet*

his reference to the particular color of Stella's eyes. <sup>1</sup>

Fly, fly, my friends! I have my death's wound, fly!  
 See there that boy, that murdering boy, I say,  
 Who like a thief hid in dark brush, doth lie,  
 Till bloody bullet get him wrongful prey!  
 So tyrant he no fitter place could spy,  
 Nor so fair level in so secret stay.  
 As that sweet black which veils the heavenly eye;  
 There himself with his shot he close doth lay.  
 Poor passenger, pass now thereby I did  
 And stayed, pleased with the prospect of the place,  
 While that black hue from me the bad guest hid.  
 But straight I saw motions of lightning grace;  
 And then descried the glisterings of his dart.  
 But ere I could fly thence, it pierced my heart. <sup>2</sup>

Such sonnets are not to be read in a matter of fact spirit; at the same time the facts and feelings may be regarded as having some basis in reality. Stella embodies the many perfections which inspire the lover; like Laura she is severely chaste and even repellent. The situations that give rise to the sonnets such as the lover's sleeplessness and his feelings upon hearing that Stella is sick are only elaborations of the "Concetti" that the Petrarchan tradition demanded. <sup>3</sup>

Another motive that inspired Sidney was his opposition to Euphuism that wanted love treated with all the pedantry of the new learning. <sup>4</sup> Sidney wanted to assert the chivalrous tradition of Petrarch. The following sonnet takes up the cause.

1. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry. Vol. II, Ch. VIII  
 2. George Reuben Potter, Elizabethan Verse and Prose, p. 54  
 3. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II, Ch. VIII  
 4. Ibid.

Let dainty wits cry on the Sisters nine,  
 That, bravely masked, their fancies may be told;  
 Or, Pindar's apes, flaunt they in phrases fine,  
 Enameling with pied flowers their thoughts of gold;  
 Or else let them in statelier glory shine,  
 Ennobling, new found tropes with problems old;  
 Or with strange similes enrich each line,  
 Of herbs or beasts which Ind or Afric hold.  
 For me, in sooth, no muse but one I know;  
 Phrases and problems from my reach do grow,  
 And strange things cost too dear for my poor sprites.  
 How then? Even thus--in Stella's face I read  
 What Love and Beauty be; then all my deed  
 But copying is what, in her, Nature writes. <sup>1</sup>

As a sonnet sequence, the Astrophel and Stella series ranks among the very best. Crosland says, "Of all the so-called sequences it is the most delicate and simply and sincerely human." <sup>2</sup>

It is arranged and polished with great care and is admirable for its avoidance of jar, too close repetition of sets of rhymes and monotony of mood. It is a model of what a series should be.

One of the least unemotional sonnets shows the artificiality of much of the love poetry and epitomizes sonnet history up to his time: <sup>3</sup>

You that do search for every purling spring  
 Which from the ribs of old Parnassus flows,  
 And every flower, not sweet perhaps, which grows  
 Near thereabouts, into your poesy wring;  
 You that do dictionary's method bring  
 Into your rhymes, running in rattling rows;

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1. George Reuben Potter, *Elizabethan Verse and Prose*, p. 50
  2. T. W. H. Crosland, *The English Sonnet*
  3. *Ibid*

You that poor Petrarch's long deceased woes  
 With new-born sighs and denizen'd wit do sing;  
 You take wrong ways; those far-fet helps be such  
 As do bewray a want of inward touch,  
 And, sure, at length stolen goods do come to light;  
 But if, both for your love and skill, your name  
 You seek to nurse at fullest breasts of Fame,  
 Stella behold, and then begin to indite, 1

Two interesting criticisms of Sidney's ability as a composer of sonnets are to be found in the writings of David Main and T. Earle Welby. The former is especially favorable as to his style.

Sir Philip Sidney "made a special study of time when it was of peculiar importance that good models should be kept in view; and his most beautiful poems take the form of the sonnet. Those of the Arcadia and Astrophel and Stella unite with rare charms of speech a rhythmical melody previously all but unknown in our literature." 2

The other is not so favorable. In Mr. Welby's opinion Sidney's sonnets do **not** satisfy as love poems. They are merely literary exercises after the manner of the time, over sweet and ingenious even when professing to be only plain speech. "They are excellent in a kind of poetry which is the noblest of accomplishments rather than the noblest of arts." 3 He goes on to say that Sidney had considerable influence over Edmund Spenser who will be considered next as one of the great poets who influenced the development of the English sonnet.

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1. George Reuben Potter, Elizabethan Verse and Prose p. 53
  2. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 251
  3. T. Earle Welby, Popular History of English Poetry

## EDMUND SPENSER (1552 (?)-1599)

In spite of the example on the part of his friend, Sidney, and a great love of Italian poetry on his own, the first man in England to studiously set aside the Italian scheme was Spenser. <sup>1</sup> He was the poet of chivalry and his reforms were closely analagous to those of Marot in France. <sup>2</sup>

The form which is familiarly known as the Spenserian came as the result of repeated experiments. The earliest were in blank verse. In them, Spenser seems so bent on producing regularity that they all show, by means of stops, a marked Petrarchan division into quatrains and tercets. <sup>3</sup> His noble and sweet notes begin in every one of them and they are worthy the boyhood of such a man and poet.

The following forms one of a series of translations from Du Bellay which he contributed to Vander Noodt's Theater for Wordlings that appeared in 1569 when he was but sixteen years of age and had just entered Pembroke Hall Cambridge. It is a favourable example of the type. <sup>4</sup>

I saw a fresh spring rise out of a rocke,  
 Clere as Christall against the Sunny beames,  
 The bottome yellow like the shining land  
 That golden Pactol drives upon the plaine.  
 It seemed that arte and nature strived to joyne  
 There in one place all pleasures of the eye.  
 There was to heare a noise alluring slepe

1. Leigh Hunt, The Book of the Sonnet, Chapter VI
2. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II, Ch. IX
3. Leigh Hunt, The Book of the Sonnet, p. 71
4. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 240

Of many ascordes more swete than Mermaid's song,  
 The seates and benches shone as Ivorie,  
 An hundred Nymphes sate side by side about,  
 When from nie Hilles a naked rout of Faunes  
 With hideous cry assembled on the place  
 Which with their feete uncleave the water fouled  
 Threw down the seates and drove the Nimphs to flight 1

About twenty years later he produced another version of the same sonnet. This is a type of the illegitimate sonnet started by Sir Thomas Wyatt when he broke the first governing laws. It is made up of three elegiac quatrains and a rhymed couplet. It has a richer quality than the former one in blank verse.

I saw a spring out of a rock forth rayle,  
 As cleare as Christall gainst the Sunnie beames,  
 The bottome yeallow, like the golden grayle  
 That bright Pactolus wacheth with his streames;  
 It seem'd that Art and Nature had assembled  
 All pleasure there, for which man's hart could long;  
 And there a noyse alluring sleepe soft trembled,  
 Of manie accords more sweete than Mermaid's song;  
 The seates and benches shone as yvorie,  
 An hundred Nymphes sate side by side about;  
 When from nigh hills with hideous outcrie,  
 A troupe of Satyres in the place did rout,  
 Which with their villeine fute the streame did ray  
 Threw down the seats and drove the Nymphs away. 2

In the third and last experiment, which he finally adopted, he interlaced the three quatrains by means of a rhyme common to each--a method which seemed to satisfy his maturer judgment. All of the sonnets in the Amoretti follow this pattern:

Sweet is the Rose, but grows upon a brere;  
 Sweet is the Junipere, but sharpe his bough;  
 Sweet is the Eglantine, but pricketh nere;  
 Sweet is the firbloome, but his branches rough;

1. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 241
2. Ibid

Sweet is the Cypresse, but his rynd is tough;  
 Sweet is the nut, but bitter is his pill;  
 Sweet is the broom-flowre, but yet sowre enough;  
 And sweet is Moly, but his root is ill.  
 So every sweet with soure is tempred still,  
 That maketh it be coveted the more;  
 For easie things that may be got at will  
 Most sorts of men doe set but little store.  
 Why then should I accoumpt of little paine,  
 That endlesse pleasure shall unto me gain? 1

The form never became popular with any other sonneteer. Leigh Hunt remarks, "It is surely not so happy as that of the Italian sonnet. The rhyme seems at once less responsive and always interfering; and the music no longer has its major and minor divisions." 2

According to George Herbert Palmer, Spenser regarded Chaucer as his master but the two poets were vastly different in their portrayal of women. Chaucer, who was well acquainted with the ladies of the court treated them realistically in his poems, but Spenser's acquaintance with them seems to have been slight and artificial. 3

"To him woman is always something far away and ethereal, an exalted object of aspiration, the guiding spirit of us poor men. Few differential qualities are reported to distinguish one woman from another, but all alike conform to the angelic pattern--angelic or devilish; for when an angel falls it becomes a devil." 4

Extravagant praise of female beauty was common in the courts of Europe during the Renaissance. The following is an

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1. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 241
  2. Leigh Hunt, The Book of the Sonnet, p. 74
  3. George Herbert Palmer, Formative Types of English Poetry, p. 74
  4. Ibid. p. 75

example of Spenser's lavish style. <sup>1</sup>

What guile is this, that those her golden tresses  
She doth attire under a net of gold;  
And with sly skill so cunningly them dresses,  
That which is gold, or hair, may scarce be told?

Is it that men's frail eyes, which gaze too bold,  
She may entangle in that golden snare;  
And being caught, may craftily enfold  
Their weaker hearts which are not well aware?

Take heed, therefore, mine eyes, how he do stare  
Henceforth too rashly on that guileful net,  
In which, if ever ye entrapped are,  
Out of her hands ye by no means shall get.

Fondness it were for any, being free  
To covet fetters, though they golden be! <sup>2</sup>

In this sonnet written more than three centuries ago the word "fondness" (folly) is the only one that might not be used now.

David Main says that Spenser's own love story forms the subject of the Amoretti and adds,

"Amid so much fruitless sonnet-wooing as was then in vogue, one welcomes the advent of a poet who to many higher merits adds the very rare one of having prosecuted a successful suit." <sup>3</sup>

Of all the critics of the Elizabethan sonnet writers the most radical seems to be John Forbis who takes the stand that the soul inspiration for their verses was Wine. In his book, The Shakespearean Enigma and An Elizabethan Mania, he works out an elaborate interpretation of the sonnets in support of

1. Hubbell and Beaty, Introduction to Poetry, p. 275

2. Ibid. p. 275

3. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 240

his theory. Of the great sonneteers, he gives the least credit to Spenser who, he says, seems to have understood the scheme of the whole thing but failed to induce himself to the state of chronic alcoholism that would enable him to write as Petrarch had--for "Laura" was none other than Wine personified as a woman. His endeavour to do this made up the burden of his sonnets and where Shakespeare and Sidney succeeded for they were honest and wailed in agony, he failed because he was insincere and blustered in regret.

It is an interesting theory but it seems to be one not generally supported. <sup>1</sup>

As to Spenser's poetical ability, Earle Welby and George Herbert Palmer are in agreement.

"Spenser was a decorative artist to whom ideas were seldom more than pegs on which to hang "sumptuous fragments" of verse."  
Welby <sup>2</sup>

"We may call Spenser the supreme show man for he writes as a painter paints."--Palmer <sup>3</sup>

Be that as it may, he established one of the five formal types of the sonnet in England the first three of which belong to the sixteenth century.

- (1. Petrarchan
- (2. Spenserian
- (3. Shakespearean
- (4. Miltonic
- (5. Contemporary <sup>4</sup>

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1. John F. Forbis, *The Shakespearean Enigma and an Elizabethan Mania*

2. T. Earle Welby, *A Popular History of English Poetry*

3. George Hervert Palmer, *Formative Types of English Poetry*, p. 79

4. Louis Untermeyer, *The Forms of Poetry*

## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)

The sonnets of Shakespeare which were probably composed between 1599 and 1602 have had the strangest and most lamentable fate of any English poems. They have been read as pure autobiography and dismissed as mere literary exercises many times. <sup>1</sup> There is, however, one thing of which we may feel absolutely certain--that they were written by Shakespeare. <sup>2</sup> They were published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe, a book seller of some note. The following dedication has been a puzzle to critics from the first:

To. The. Onlie. Begetter. Of.  
 These. Insuing. Sonnets.  
 Mr. W. H. All. Happiness.  
 And. That. Eternitie.  
 Promised.  
 by.  
 Our. Ever. Living. Poet.  
 Wisheth.  
 The Well-Wishing.  
 Adventurer. In.  
 Setting.  
 Forth.

T. T. <sup>3</sup>

Authorities are pretty well agreed that "Mr. W. H." veiled the family name of the Earl of Pembroke--William Herbert, but the identity of the "dark lady" remains a mystery.

Like Spenser, Shakespeare abandoned the Italian model and adopted the form of three elegiac quatrains with a concluding couplet but he avoided the interlocking rhyme. His extensive use of Surrey's model: a b a b c d c d e f e f g g, made it more popular.

1. T. Earle Welby, A Popular History of English Poetry
2. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 277
3. Ibid. p. 278

Because of his total neglect of the Italian form and his failure to mention any of the Italian masters, Leigh Hunt does not believe the theory that Shakespeare ever visited Italy. <sup>1</sup>

Many of the sonnets contain reminiscences of the French sonneteers of the sixteenth century and it is probable that they had more influence upon Shakespeare than did any of the other foreign poets. It is thought that in some cases he shows direct acquaintance with Ronsard. <sup>2</sup>

Although Shakespeare was definitely following a vogue, his sonnets stand apart in important respects from the other sequences of the time. They are especially outstanding for their profound and passionate utterance, and they are not addressed to anyone who can be identified with any degree of certainty. <sup>3</sup>

"At their worst the sonnets may have been only literary exercises on conventional themes, but at their best they are surely both superb poetry and the result of genuine emotion." <sup>4</sup>

John Forbis would have us believe that Petrarch originated the Wine-inspired sonnet and that Wine was personified in Shakespeare's mysterious "Mr. W. H." and the "dark lady". His argument is that in the first eighteen sonnets Shakespeare advises the young man (himself) to marry and beget a family.

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1. Leigh Hunt, *The Book of the Sonnet*, Chapter VI
  2. Neilson and Thorndike, *The Facts About Shakespeare*, p. 57
  3. *Ibid.* p. 88
  4. *Ibid.* p. 190

The marriage is the espousal of Wine, the children are the products of the mind. Wine is introduced in the nineteenth. In the twentieth he unsexes his love, "the master-mistress" of his passion. Thereafter the addressee seems to be neuter rather than masculine or feminine.

The "dark lady" sonnets reveal Wine in its debasing and degrading character. Only one of them is addressed to a woman. The sonnet sequences all treat of the same subject. Surely all the poets did not love the one woman nor were there several women all so nearly alike. "Therefore", he says, referring to the sixteenth century poets in general, "the mysterious thing was not a person at all, but an inanimate thing--an intoxicating wine." <sup>1</sup>

Another theory suggests that the sonnets of Shakespeare express Platonic ideas rather than real experiences. The actual man or woman seems to be forgotten as he develops his theme. <sup>2</sup>

Whatever may have been their origin, an illicit love affair, Platonic ideal, or even Wine, they speak for themselves as pieces of exquisite poetry which have not been surpassed.

"If" It is in his sonnets that you find conclusive proof that he was "the gentle Shakespeare."--Henry Reed <sup>3</sup>

The late Professor George Wilson considered this sonnet

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1. John F. Forbis, *The Shakespearean Enigma and an Elizabethan Mania*, p. 275
  2. T. Earle Welby, *A Popular History of English Poetry*
  3. David M. Main, *A Treasury of English Sonnets*, p. 298



Even so my sun one early morn did shine  
 With all triumphant splendor on my brow;  
 But out, alack! he was but one hour mine,  
 The region cloud hath masked him from me now.  
 Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth;  
 Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most deeply and affectingly beautiful of all  
 is the following:

No longer mourn for me when I am dead  
 Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell  
 Give warning to the world that I am fled  
 From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell.  
 Nay, if you read this line, remember not  
 The hand that writ it; for I love you so,  
 That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,  
 If thinking on me then should make you woe.  
 Oh, if, I say, you look upon this verse  
 When I perhaps compounded am with clay,  
 Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,  
 But let your love even with my life decay;  
 Lest the wise world should look into your moan,  
 And mock you with me after I am gone. 2

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1. George Reuben Potter, Elizabethan Verse and Prose, p. 187  
 2. Ibid. p. 188

THE MINOR SONNETEERS OF THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

## MINOR SONETEERS OF THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

The vogue of the sonnet in the Elizabethan Age was intense but brief. Shakespeare was the last to leave any marked influence that survived.

The uninspired sonneteer was the worst. Surrey had used the form as an instrument for refining the language of poetry, Sidney animated it with fire and invention; Spenser gave it sweetness in a new and different form and through it Shakespeare gave voice to his philosophical view of human nature. The later group degenerated from the high honors won by the three masters of the form.

## SIR WALTER RALEIGH (1552-1618)

The one sonnet that is Raleigh's masterpiece does credit to the man as a poet. If he had devoted more time to the writing of verse he might have attained a place beside Shakespeare for beauty of expression.

## A VISION UPON THE FAERY QUEEN

Methought I saw the grave where Laura lay,  
 Within that temple where the vestal flame  
 Was wont to burn; and passing by that way  
 To see that bruised dust of living fame,  
 Whose tomb fair Love and fairer Virtue kept,  
 All suddenly I saw the Faery Queen;  
 At whose approach the soul of Petrarch wept;  
 And from thenceforth those Graces were not seen,  
 For they this Queen attended; in whose stead  
 Oblivion laid him down on Laura's hearse.

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Hereat the hardest stones were seen to bleed,  
 And groans of buried ghosts the heavens did pierce,  
 Where Homer's spright did tremble all for grief  
 And cursed the access of that celestial thief. 1

The highest tribute given this sonnet is the imitation of such poets as John Milton and William Wordsworth. 2

"Methought I saw my late espoused saint"--Milton

"Methought I saw the footsteps of a throne"--Wordsworth

#### THOMAS WATSON (1557-1592)

One of the worst offenders against the sonnet form was Thomas Watson. The most perfect sympathy with the time fails to explain or justify the favour with which he was regarded by his contemporaries. 3

There is much method but little feeling in his verses. He tried to show originality by extending the length to eighteen lines but the result was merely a sequence of three stanzas each containing six lines and the lack of unity is particularly noticeable. 4

If Jove himself be subject unto Love,  
 And range the woods to find a mortal prey,  
 If Neptune from the seas himself remove,  
 And seek on sands with earthly wights to play,  
 Then may I love my peerless choice by right,  
 Who far excels each other mortal wight?

If Pluto could by love be drawn from hell  
 To yield himself a silly virgin's thrall,  
 If Phoebus could vouchsafe on earth to dwell,  
 To win a rustic maid unto his call,

1. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 13

2. Ibid, p. 264

3. Ibid. p. 264

4. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II, Ch. X

Then how much more should I adore the sight  
Of her in whom the heavens themselves delight?

If country Pan might follow nymphs in chase,  
And yet through love remain devoid of blame,  
If satyrs were excused for seeking grace  
To joy the fruits of any mortal dame,  
Then why should I once doubt to love her still,  
On whom ne gods nor men can gaze their fill? 1

Despite his radical departure from the accepted sonnet forms, George Steevens pronounced him "a more elegant sonneteer than Shakespeare" and Professor Henry Morley claims for him the merit of being the sweetest of the purely amatory poets of Elizabeth's reign. 2

In David Main's own opinion, Watson did not "yield a dozen verses possessing one jot of human interest; unless perhaps we except the really beautiful Eglogue upon the Death of Sir Francis Wakingham (1590) which has an occasional remote resemblance to Milton's Lycidas." 3

The following taken from The Teares of Francie or Love Disdained is one of his best and follows the Shakespearean pattern.

I saw the object of my pining thought  
Within a garden of sweet Nature's placing;  
Wherein an arbour artificial wrought,  
By workman's wondrous skill the garden gracing.  
Did boast his glory, glory far renowned.  
For in his shady boughs my mistress slept;  
And with a garland of his branches crowned,  
Her dainty forehead from the sun ykept.  
Imperious Love upon her eyelids tending,

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1. George Reuben Potter, Elizabethan Verse and Prose, p. 99
  2. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 264
  3. Ibid.

Playing his wanton sports at every beck,  
 And into every finest limb descending,  
 From eyes to lips, from lips to ivory neck;  
 And every limb supplied, and t' every part  
 Had free access, but durst not touch her heart. 1

THOMAS LODGE (1558 (?)-1625)

"There seems no reason to question Mr. Minto's opinion that Lodge's temperament was not specially fitted for the sonnet form of composition." 2

The sonnets addressed to Phillis have delicacy and grace but are more loose and straggling than those of his contemporaries, Constable and Daniel. His themes are the usual praises of beauty and complaints of unkindness, and he followed the fashionable mode of Euphuism in his writing; but the emotions as he expresses them seem sincere and from the heart.

Unfortunately, many of them suffer from his caprices of style. Some contain eighteen lines consisting of four quatrains and couplet and many of them have double rhymes.

The tender musical quality of the ninth is noticeable in the following at the beginning, but it breaks down at the very end.

The dewie--Roseate morne had with hir haire  
 In sundrie sorts the Indian Clime adorned,  
 And now hir lies apparaild in teares,  
 The losse of lovely Memnon long had moornd;  
 When as she spide the Nimph whom I admire,  
 Kembinge hir locks, of which the yellow golde  
 Made blush the beauties of hir curled wire,

1. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 21  
 2. Ibid. p. 260

Which heaven it selfe with wonder might beholde.  
 Then redd with shame, hir reverend locks she rent,  
 And weeping hid the beauty of hir face;  
 The flower of fancie wrought such discontent,  
 The sighes which midst the aire she breath's a space,  
 A three daies stormie tempest did maintaine,  
 Hir shame a fire, her lies a swelling raine. 1

The thirteenth is an example of his eighteen line structure which never became recognized as a regular sonnet form.

Love guards the roses of thy lips  
 And flies about them like a bee;  
 If I approach he forward skips,  
 And if I kiss he stingeth me.  
 Love in thine eyes doth build his bower,  
 And sleeps within their pretty shine;  
 And if I look the boy will lour,  
 And from their orbs shoot shafts divine.  
 Love works thy heart within his fire,  
 And in my tears doth firm the same;  
 And if I tempt it will retire,  
 And of my plaints doth make a game.  
 Love let me cull her choicest flowers;  
 And pity me, and calm her eye;  
 Make soft her heart, dissolve her lours;  
 Then will I praise thy deity.  
 But if thou do not, Love, I'll truly serve her  
 In spite of thee, and by firm faith deserve her. 2

#### HENRY CONSTABLE (1562-1613)

As every sonneteer had his "Laura", Henry Constable addressed his sonnets to one whom he called Diana. He wrote them after the manner of the later Italian Petrarchists. His attempts to discover some new metaphysical idea about love, embody it in a sensible image and finish it off with an epigram ended only in images and epigrams for all the metaphysics had been exhausted. 3

1. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 261
2. George Reuben Potter, Elizabethan Verse and Prose, p. 84
3. W. J. Courthope, History of English Poetry, Vol. II, Ch. X

According to T. W. H. Crosland, he was not an outstanding poet but he did help to settle the true form of the English sonnet pure and simple. <sup>1</sup>

The following is an example rhymed on the Shakespearean plan but it is without the octet pause:

To live in hell, and heaven to behold,  
 To welcome life, and die a living death,  
 To sweat with heat and yet be freezing cold  
 To grasp at stars, and lie the earth beneath,  
 To tread a maze that never shall have end,  
 To burn in sighs, and starve in daily tears,  
 To clime a hill and never to descend,  
 Giants to kill, and quake at childish fears,  
 To pine for food and watch th' Hesperian tree,  
 To thirst for drink and nectar still to draw,  
 To live accurst, whom men hold blest to be,  
 And weep those wrongs, which never creature saw;  
 If this be love, if love in these be founded,  
 My heart is love, for these in it are grounded. <sup>2</sup>

Rhetoric predominates in the foregoing sonnet, but the following is noticeable for color and fancy.

Pity refusing my poor Love to feed,  
 A beggar starved for want of help he lies,  
 And at your mouth, the door of beauty, cries  
 That thence some alms of sweet grants may proceed.  
 But as he waiteth for some almes deed  
 A cherry-tree before the door he spies--  
 'O dear!' quoth he, 'two cherries may suffice,  
 Two only life may save in this my need'  
 But beggars, can they nought but cherries eat?  
 Pardon my Love, he is a goddess' son,  
 And never feedeth but on dainty meat,  
 Else need he not to pine as he hath done;  
 For only the sweet fruit of this sweet tree  
 Can give food to my Love, and life to me. <sup>3</sup>

1. T. W. H. Crosland, *The English Sonnet*

2. *Ibid.* p. 131

3. David M. Main, *A Treasury of English Sonnets*, p. 258

## SAMUEL DANIEL (1562-1619)

Lyrical dialogue rather than sonnets seemed to be more fitting to the genius of Daniel who never fully understood the nature and special function of the latter form.

His stainless moral purity and nobleness of spirit were marked personal qualities which he possessed, and these made up for many of the faults to be found in his sonnet sequence addressed to Delia. Surely the fifty-fourth in the series may be regarded as worthy of his or any genius. 1

Care--Charmer Sleep, son of the sable Night,  
 Brother to Death, in silent darkness born,  
 Relieve my languish, and restore the light;  
 With dark forgetting of my care return,  
 And let the day be time enough to mourn  
 The shipwreck of my ill-adventured youth;  
 Let waking eyes suffice to wail their scorn,  
 Without the torment of the night's untruth.  
 Cease, dreams, the images of day desires,  
 To model forth the passions of the morrow;  
 Never let rising Sun approve you liars,  
 To add more grief to aggravate my sorrow;  
 Still let me sleep, embracing clouds in vain,  
 And never wake to feel the day's disdain. 2

## MICHAEL DRAYTON (1563-1631)

Unlike his contemporaries, Drayton concealed the identity of his mistress by addressing his sonnet sequence to the impersonal Idea; but his theme is the same as theirs.

His claim to fame rests chiefly upon one sonnet of superior merit--the famous "Since there's no help, come let us kiss and

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1. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 269  
 2. Ibid. p. 24

part." Pride, deference, passion, and self control are skillfully intermingled and the manly quality that breathes through the lines cannot be gainsaid. In that age of conventional over-sweetened sonneteering it stands as a thing apart for its human appeal and still remains a favorite with sonnet readers.

Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part.  
 Nay, I have done; you get no more of me.  
 And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart  
 That thus so cleanly I myself can free.  
 Shake hands for ever; cancel all our vows;  
 And when we meet at any time again,  
 Be it not seen in either of our brows  
 That we one jot of former love retain.  
 Now at the last grasp of Love's latest breath,  
 When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,  
 When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,  
 And Innocence is closing up his eyes--  
 Now if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,<sup>1</sup>  
 From death to life thou might'st him yet recover.<sup>1</sup>

John Forbis in support of his "Wine theory" claims that the foregoing sonnet marked the beginning of the poet's reform. He is bidding farewell to Wine.<sup>2</sup>

The forty-first sonnet in the series has a wealth of beauty.

Dear: why should you command me to my rest,  
 When now the night doth summon all to sleep?  
 Methinks this time becometh lovers best;  
 Night was ordained together friends to keep.  
 How happy are all other living things,  
 Which though the day disjoin by several flight,  
 The quiet evening yet together brings,  
 And each returns unto his love at night!  
 O thou art so courteous unto all,  
 Why shouldst thou, night, abuse me only thus,  
 That every creature to his kind dost call,  
 And yet 'tis thou dost only sever us?

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1. George Reuben Potter, Elizabethan Verse and Prose, p. 105
  2. John F. Forbis, The Shakespearean Enigma and An Elizabethan Mania

Well could I wish it would be ever day,  
If when night comes, you bid me go away. 1

"The spirit of the hour, with all its kindness and peace was never more perfectly breathed into English verse." 2

BARNABE BARNES (1569-1609)

Barnes poetry meets with little favor compared to that of the other sonneteers. Welby 3 says that he was capable of great excellence but apparently he did not use his talents to the best advantage. W. J. Courthope is especially opposed, accusing him of inventing a mixture of nonsense and nastiness under the guise of sonnets. 4

David Main is far more kindly in his criticism.

"Apart from their essential poetical qualities..... their sensuous delight, their glories of pure and lovely color, and fragrance of choice flowers, they entitle Barnes to rank as one of the most artistic sonneteers of Elizabeth's reign; for while on every side the sonnet-form was deteriorating, we find this poet habitually though not invariably, employing in the service of his Parthenophe a stanza as obedient to technical prescription--the inevitable riming couplet of the period always excepted--as those in which Laura's name is laid up forever....." 5

In the reigns of Elizabeth and James in England the sonnet form was used to give expression to emotional verses as well as romantic love themes. The following sonnet is one in which Barnes treats of his religious feelings. It is one of his better verses.

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1. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 24
  2. Ibid. p. 272
  3. T. Earle Welby, A Popular History of English Poetry
  4. W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, Vol. II, p. 304
  5. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 303

Unto my spirit lend an angel's wing,  
 By which it might mount to that place of rest  
 Where Paradise may me relieve, opprest;  
 Lend to my tongue an angel's voice to sing  
 Thy praise my comfort, and for ever bring  
 My notes thereof from the bright east to west.  
 Thy mercy lend unto my soul distresst,  
 Thy grace unto my wits; then shall the sling  
 Of righteousness that monster Satan kill,  
 Who with despair my dear salvation dared,  
 And like the Philistine stood breathing still  
 Proud threats against my soul for heaven prepared;  
 At length I like an angel shall appear,  
 In spotless white an angel's crown to wear. <sup>1</sup>

JOHN DONNE (1573-1631)

Another of the poets who wrote religious sonnets during the sixteenth century was John Donne. He was the only one of the English poets who has given us a "Crown of Sonnets". This comprises the first seven of his "Holy Sonnets" and has some fine passages; but although his piety was sincere it was unhealthy and he fell far short of doing justice to the "Divine Goddess." <sup>2</sup>

While a few of his sonnets are irregular, most of them are of the legitimate order; but the feeling for pure beauty found in the verses of the greater poets is lacking in his. This is the most definite limitation to the high quality of his sonnets. <sup>3</sup>

His revolt against the insincerities of Petrarchan sonneteers is evidenced in some of his verses but his own passionate strain does not measure up to the standards of those who contributed the

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1. David M. Main, A Treasury of English Sonnets, p. 55
  2. Leigh Hunt, The Book of the Sonnet, Ch. VI
  3. H. J. C. Grierson, The Poems of John Donne, p. XVIII

most to the development of the form.

The following is an example of his best style and is the first of the "Holy Sonnets"

Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?  
 Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste;  
 I run to death, and death meets me as fast,  
 And all my pleasures are like yesterday.  
 I dare not move my dim eyes any way;  
 Despair behind and death before doth cast  
 Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste  
 By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh.  
 Only thou art above, and when towards thee  
 By thy leave I can look, I rise again;  
 But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,  
 That not one hour myself I can sustain.  
 Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art,  
 And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart. 1

In the beginning it was the lesser poets who made the greater ones possible. Even though many of the verses of the minor sonneteers are not comparable in form and beauty to those of Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare, still, taken as a group they served a deep purpose in the development of the sonnet. In their own day they were popular and helped to create in England an atmosphere of poetry in which the sonnet grew and thrived making possible the best production of the Elizabethan Age.

"The Elizabethan giants had no imitators; being themselves imitators and superb improvers on small men." 2

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1. George Reuben Potter, *Elizabethan Verse and Prose*, p. 221  
 2. T. W. H. Crosland, *The English Sonnet*, p. 139

CONCLUSION

THE CONVENT  
PATENT BOND  
SHERBORN

## CONCLUSION

In the beginning definite questions were raised regarding the growth and development of the sonnet to which the study that followed found answers. Now, in the conclusion, we may summarize the findings, ever keeping in mind the contribution that the answer of each question makes to the all important one, "How did the sonnet grow and develop in England in the sixteenth century?"

First, a sonnet is a form of poetry subject to such limitations of rhyme and metre as to make it one of the most perfect works of art in the field of literature. While its original form was undergoing changes as the poets experimented and expanded it, the original pattern was never forgotten. Moreover, it served as a curb upon the most radical of the would-be reformers who were constantly reminded that the path that led to the beauty of verse such as that achieved by their elders was indeed a straight and narrow one.

Second, with regard to the exact place and time of its origin, it was found that while definite facts are lacking the general concensus of opinion places it in Provence in or near the beginning of the twelfth century. From there it went to Italy where in the hands of Dante and Petrarch it assumed its legitimate form. In France its popularity became so marked as to attract the attention of the British poets who were thereby lured to try their skill in composing English sonnets.

Third, as to the subjects that may properly constitute

the content of a sonnet we found that while love was always one of the predominant and favorite themes it was not the only one that poets chose. In fact as the Elizabethan period progressed we found religion gaining in popularity as a theme, especially among the minor sonneteers.

The fourth question, "To whom does England owe the development of the form known as the English sonnet?" was subdivided for the sake of convenience in handling the subject and was answered in the fifth and sixth divisions.

First, the question naturally arose as to the first English sonneteer and the form which he employed. We found it to be Sir Thomas Wyatt who not only brought the sonnet from Italy but also broke the first laws and started the genre known as the illegitimate sonnet. His contemporary, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey breathed more life into it by using it as an instrument for refining the language of poetry in England and earned for himself the title "Father of the English Sonnet."

After the sonnet was established by Wyatt and Surrey, we saw its rapid rise to heights of achievement as it came from the skillful pens of Sir Philip Sidney, who endowed it with fire and animation, Edmund Spenser, who gave it sweetness in a new and different form, and William Shakespeare who brought it to a climax of glory with his own distinctive form and melody.

Fifth, it was both form and theme that the English poets borrowed from Italy and France. Although they expanded it and established new laws for its structure they were never unaware

of its underlying principles and the sonnet remained the reflection of a foreign substance. The inspiration given them by Italian and French poets was responsible for awakening their own genius.

Finally the last phase of the study gave consideration to the poets whose fame rests upon perhaps not more than one sonnet, or who made an attempt to introduce innovations, for example Thomas Watson's eighteen line structure, that failed to satisfy the discriminating ear of those who were captivated by the harmony and artistry of the preceding forms.

At the same time we must not forget or underestimate the contribution made by the minor sonneteers as a group, for without their keen and abiding interest in the sonnet, it is possible that we would not today be so aware of it as a thing of beauty, and appreciative of the sixteenth century poets who gave of their best abilities to make it worthy of our admiration.

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