

## Sonnet in the Elizabethan age

### Introduction:

Like many another literary genres the sonnet in England was imported from abroad. It most probably originated in Italy with Dante who wrote a number of sonnets to his beloved named Beatrice. But the flowering of the sonnet came with Petrarch (1304-74), a generation later. It was Wyatt who introduced the sonnet in England.

Though he wrote much earlier, it was in 1557, a year before Elizabeth was coronated (and some fifteen years after his death), that his sonnets were published in Tottle's Miscellany. Wyatt's lead was accepted by Surrey whose sonnets were likewise published after his death, in the Miscellany. Wyatt was much under the spell of his model Petrarch, and out of his thirty-two sonnets, seventeen are but adaptations of Petrarch's. Moreover, most of them follow the Petrarchan pattern; that is, each has two parts-an octave (eight lines) followed by a sestet (six lines). In between the octave and the sestet there is a marked pause indicated on paper by some blank space. With the ninth line comes the volta or the turn of thought. The thought in a Petrarchan sonnet may be compared to a wave which goes on rising and reaches its highest altitude with the eighth line and then starts petering out till it dies at the end. The octave in a Petrarchan sonnet always has the rhyme-scheme abbaabba, though the sestet may have one of the various patterns such as zscdcdcdorcddee. Whereas Wyatt mostly adhered to the Petrarchan pattern, Surrey invented a new one for his sonnets, which later was to be adopted by most Elizabethan sonneteers the most prominent of whom was Shakespeare. This pattern came to be termed the Shakespearean pattern. The feature of the Surrey-esque pattern is the division of the fourteen lines into four units-three quatrains (four lines) and the ending couplet (two lines). The rhyme-scheme followed is a b a b, a b a b, a b a b, c c. Both Wyatt and Surrey imitated in their sonnets the conventional thoughts of Petrarch, which rendered them somewhat artificial and insincere. Surrey's sonnets have a tenderness and grace, occasional lyrical melody, and genuine-looking sentiments which are absent from Wyatt's. Moreover, he is easily the better craftsman of the two. However, Wyatt also displays now and then some masculine vigour and disarming simplicity so characteristic of him. All told, his sonnets are, however, much the clumsier.

### Thomas Watson:

For many years after the publication of Tottle's Miscellany the sonnet seems to have failed to attract the attention of poets. It was only in the fifteen-nineties that the vogue of the sonnet got itself established in England, so much so that not even one man of any poetic pretension could do without the production of a "sonnet sequence" addressed to his mistress, real or imaginary (and, as Donne put it, many of them had "no mistress, but their Muse!"). After Tottle the name of the sonnet came also to be applied to some other types of short lyric which were not necessarily fourteen-liners. It was left for Marlowe's friend Thomas Watson (1557-92) to recall first the attention of the readers to the sonnet after Wyatt and Surrey. His Hecatompethia was published in 1582, at the time when Sidney was composing his own sequence entitled Astrophel and Stella which was later published in 1591. It is with Sidney's work that the popular vogue of the sonnet began. The vogue remained in full swing till the end of the sixteenth century. How many thousand sonnets were written between 1591 and 1600 is anybody's guess, for about two thousand are extant even today. The most prominent among the "followers" of

Sidney were Spenser and Shakespeare. In those years a fresh sonneteering impulse came from France. Wyatt and Surrey had looked towards Petrarch but with Elizabethan sonneteers the Petrarchan influence had since died down. Instead, they drew inspiration from the works of the French sonneteers, such as Ronsard (1524-85), Du Bellay (1525-60), and Desportes (1546-1606) who appeared to them as more "modern" and effective than Petrarch.

Sidney:

Sidney's (1554-86) most important work was his sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella* which appeared in 1591. It comprised one hundred and eight sonnets and eleven songs. In it Sidney told the story of his unrequited love for Penelope, just as Petrarch in his own sonnets had told the story of his unsuccessful love-affair with "Laura" Penelope is Stella (=a star), and Sidney himself *Astrophel* ☺ star eighty-eight sonnets in which he narrates the story of his wooing of Elizabeth Boyle, his initial frustration, and his final success culminating in their marriage, which is exquisitely celebrated in his wedding hymn. *Epithalamion*. The *Amoretti* sonnets show a consistent level of craftsmanship though the profound and stirring intensity of Drayton's "Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part" and Sidney's "Leave me, O love which reachest but to dust" is absent from them. However, the sonnets are quite autobiographical in nature and based more or less on the actual experiences of the poet. The element of convention is, however, also quite obvious. Many of the lovers (Spenser's) sigh are of the Petrarchan brand, and the proud and disdainful attitude of the cruel mistress is a pretty traditional feature. And then there are the traditional conceits and extravagances of imagery so dear even to Sidney. Nevertheless, the *Amoretti* sonnets constitute the only major work of Spenser in which he gives utterance to his personal sentiments without having a recourse to the "dark conceit"-allegory. With respect to the content, Spenser's sonnet sequence can be divided into two unequal parts:

(i) Sonnets 1-62 deal with the unrequited love of the poet who "sighing like a furnace" writes mostly in the traditional manner.

(ii) Sonnets 63-84 deal with the lover's happiness. The maidenly bashfulness of the mistress is gone and she surrenders herself happily to the ardent lover. In no. 64 he records the first kiss and in no. 67 describes himself as a hunter who after a toilsome pursuit has succeeded in securing his quarry, which is, of course, the mistress herself who at the approach of the hunter

Sought not to fly but fearless still did bide,  
Till I in hand her yet half trembling took,  
And with her own good will her firmly tied;  
Strange thing, me seem'd to see a beast so-wild  
So goodly won, with her own will beguil'd.

The usual, though not invariable, rhyme-scheme of Spenser's sonnets is abab, be be, edcd, e e which came to be known later as the Spenserian pattern. It will be seen that the three quatrains are very deftly interlinked through rhyme. The last rhyme of the first quatrain is used in the first line of the second and the last rhyme of second quatrain is likewise used in the first line of the third. The result is a complicated rhyme-pattern with a harmonious orchestral effect which is so characteristic of Spenser's poetry, an exquisite metrical artist as he is.

Shakespeare:

Shakespeare's sonnets have proved an attractive bone for the generation after generation of critics to gnaw at. These sonnets, some one hundred and fifty-four in number, were first published in a body in 1609: though there is clear evidence that they were in circulation as early as 1598 and were written most probably in 1595-96. The first one hundred and twenty-six sonnets are addressed to a young and handsome man who has been variously interpreted as the Earl of Southampton and William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. The next twenty-six sonnets are addressed to a "dark" and wanton lady who betrays the poet for the young man. Albert C. Baugh in *A Literary History of England* observes: "Of all the Elizabethan sonnet sequences Shakespeare's is the least typical. It celebrates not the idealized love of an idealized mistress but the affection of an older man for a gilded and wayward youth." In his sonnets Shakespeare frequently bewails his anguish and misfortunes. He feels to be an outcast, the young patron starts liking a rival poet, and the poet's mistress deserts him for the young man. In expressing his anguish Shakespeare lends his verses a rare glow of lyrical melody and meditative energy which strike one as coming from a heart which really feels what it articulates. Shakespeare is very exasperatingly impersonal in his dramatic works, but in the sonnets, he, to use the words of Wordsworth, "unlocked his heart". There seems to be more of genuineness and less of convention in his sonnets. Even then, we cannot accept Wordsworth's sweeping statement. "Some of the sonnets are," to quote Albert C. Baugh. "obstinately private and elusive, and some are conceits, exercises in reaching old conclusions by new ways. But the happiest of them reach the old conclusions through series of metaphors of incomparable suggestive power. The style...is largely free from the ingenuities of the early plays and from the dense figurativeness of the later". In spite of the agonised tone and the rather lugubrious atmosphere of the sonnets, they end on an optimistic note, for there is the triumphant affirmation of the transcendence of love (the poet's love for his patron). Thus even in the sonnets, as elsewhere, we are convinced of Shakespeare's insistent sanity of outlook. Formally, Shakespeare's sonnets follow the rhyme-scheme aba b,cdcd, efefg g, which was first used by Surrey and which was the most popular among Elizabethan sonneteers. One characteristic of Shakespeare's sonnets is that the final couplet, far from coming as the .crescendo, comes with the feebleness of almost an afterthought or a parenthetic remark-generally affirming his love for the young man.