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SONNET FORMS

English poets have borrowed verse forms from many languages, but none have met with as much favor and been so universally accepted as the sonnet. Nearly all of the greatest poets and many of the minor ones have written at least a few sonnets, possibly to see whether they could, for good sonnets are difficult to write; there are too many restrictions for it to be otherwise. The sonnet must be written in a set form and confined to the expression of a single sentiment. This makes it a more conscious form of art, and hence more difficult. In general it is a lyric poem of fourteen iambic pentameter lines arranged according to a prescribed rime order. Alden defines the sonnet as a highly elaborated stanza, forming in itself the body of an entire and perfectly unified poem.

The sonnet originated in Italy at the beginning of the twelfth century. The name comes from the Italian "sonetto," a little song. It was generally a love song and written to be sung to an accompaniment. This Italian sonnet developed through several hundred years, and was carried to perfection by Petrarch in the fourteenth century. It was introduced into England in the reign of Henry VIII by Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surry. Sir Thomas Wyatt first translated some of the Petrarchian sonnets, and later, in 1557, he and Surry printed some of their original work under the title *Songs and Sonnets* in a publication called *Tottel's Miscellany*.

The first English sonnets followed closely the form of their Italian model. This form consists of an octave composed of two quatrains and a sestet composed of two tercets. The subject is opened in the octave and the sentiment expressed in the sestet, which is sharply divided from the octave. These Petrarchian, or Italian, sonnets have a much more complex rime structure than the form adopted by the English poets a little later. The octave has a regular rime scheme, abba abba. This is always found in the Italian sonnet, but the sestet admits of more varia-

tions cde cde, or cd cd cd, or cde dee. These are the usual forms, but sometimes edd eee is included. At the end of the octave there is a marked rhetorical pause, a sharp break both in the form and theme. The entire structural form corresponds to that of the content. Gummere says: "This sharp division between octave and sestet makes the Italian type well fitted for expressing thought first in narrative, then in abstract form, or for expressing a simile between two objects or situations."

Other poets have copied the sonnet form with various changes. These poems written according to the English models are less interesting because they are less a characteristic and separate form of art; they are simply modifications of the Italian form in the direction of greater simplicity. The change was chiefly in form, but since the form and content followed side by side in the Italian type, the content too underwent a change in form; instead of breaking sharply at the end of the octave, it may change in the middle of a line or it may flow on through the greater part of the sestet, as do many of Shakespeare's. Sonnets of this sort are frequently arranged in couplets, the last being an epigrammatic summary of the whole. In general, however, the English form is simply a tendency toward greater freedom. The rime is less complicated and hence more obvious; it has no fixed rime scheme but ab ab cd cd ef ef gg, or modifications either in the direction of greater or less freedom are frequent.

This less restricted form grew up gradually. The earlier English sonnet writers had followed the Italian both in form and theme, and their theme was almost always love. Shakespeare's nearly all have this theme, though they are written in the English form, which he may be said to have perfected. The reasons for the change are not known, but it is probable that Shakespeare and some of the other poets intuitively realized that the restricted Italian form was not suited to the expression of simple emotions or light love songs. They, therefore, sought a freer form, better suited to the general theme of sonnets.

This feeling also gave rise to a change to more serious subjects, and most of the poets who followed the Italian form, no matter what their theme, treated it in a serious thought-

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ful manner. The Italian language may admit of love songs being written in a set form, but in English the intricate structure makes it a more conscious form of art, better suited to the reflective than the song type of lyric. Recent poetry tends toward the more regular Italian form but is reflective in content.

Although one of the chief requirements of the sonnet is that it shall express only one thought, some poets have written a number of sonnets on a central theme, each sonnet dealing with a single aspect of it. Most of the poets who have written a large number of sonnets have written these cycles or sequences, as they are called. They were popular with the earlier sonnet writers and Shakespeare and Sidney both wrote sequences. Among later writers Rosetti and Mrs. Browning wrote sonnet cycles, which are among their best poems. Brander Matthews says of sonnet sequences: "Certain poets have chosen to use it almost as if it were a stanza. They have composed a succession of sonnets on a central theme, each devoted to a single aspect of this. Then sonnet sequences were popular with the Elizabethans and they have been attractive to certain of the Victorians, especially to Rosetti and Mrs. Browning."

While we can not call the sonnet a popular form of verse, most poets have attempted it, with more or less success. Brander Matthews calls it, "the noblest fixed form of English verse firmly established for more than three centuries. It has proved a superb instrument for the supreme masters of English poetry; and in no other tongue is there a more splendid collection of sonnets than in our own." Yet strange to say, all the masters of English poetry have not written great sonnets; the restricted form seemed to hamper their genius. The two greatest poets of the nineteenth century, Browning and Tennyson, wrote no sonnets that are among their best poems.

There is no fixed English sonnet form, but all sonnets that vary very much from the Italian are classed as English. Some are almost Italian in form, while others are hardly more than poems of fourteen iambic pentameter lines. Shakespeare's are usually composed of three quatrains and a couplet and his rime scheme is ab ab cd cd ef ef gg. This wide variation from the regular form has

caused many critics to deny that Shakespeare's sonnets are justly entitled to the name. Brander Matthews quotes Aldrich as saying, "In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the couplet has the snap of a whiplash and turns the sonnet into an epigram. To my thinking this hurts many of Shakespeare's beautiful poems of fourteen lines, for they are simply that." Other critics do not agree with Mr. Aldrich, for Gummere says, "Critics esteem the excellence of Shakespeare's sonnet because it rises to a climax in the closing couplet."

The sonnets are especially interesting as a transition between Shakespeare's earlier poems and his drama. Why they were written is not known. Some Shakespearian students think that they are personal experiences, others that they were written merely to flatter some wealthy patron, while others consider them as simply literary exercises. Their theme is love, but mostly love of man for man, for a hundred and twenty-six are addressed to "a man right fair." This man seems to have been a young friend of Shakespeare's to whom he gave good advice. The remainder are addressed to a "woman colored ill." The sonnets do not represent the best of Shakespeare, nor yet the best of the sonnet, but to Shakespeare belongs the credit of first bringing the sonnet to the high place which it holds today.

The next poet whose sonnets can be called truly great was Milton. He wrote in all only seventeen sonnets, but many of them are among the best in the English language. His form follows the Italian, but they are peculiar in that the sense often runs through the octave and changes in the middle of the first line of the sestet. In others it runs straight through without a break. Milton's serious intellectual subjects were more suited to the restricted Italian form than the lighter themes of the Elizabethans had been. Gummere says that as an outburst of pure feeling Milton's splendid sonnet, *Avenge O Lord*, is perhaps the best in our language.

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose
bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains
cold;
Even them who kept thy truth so pure
of old,
When all our fathers worshipped stocks
and stones,

Forget not: in thy book record their groans
 Who were thy sheep, and in their an-
 cient fold
 Slain by the bloody Piedmontese, that
 rolled
 Mother with infant down the rocks.
 Their moans
 The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
 To Heaven. Their martyred blood and
 ashes sow
 O'er all the Italian fields, where still
 doth sway
 The triple Tyrant; that from these may grow
 A hundred-fold, who, having learnt thy
 way,
 Early may fly the Babylonian woe.

While a great sonnet writer is not always a great poet, or a great poet always a great sonnet writer, most of the major poets have written some good sonnets. Wordsworth's are among his finest poems, and, though he did not follow the strict Italian type, the general restrictions and limitations seemed to be what he needed to do his best work. Most of these sway between the form of Milton and that of the later writer. Gummere compared Milton's to a "rocket rapidly thrown off, then breaking into light and falling in a shower of brightness." And of the later writers he says, "The later school, however, aims to write sonnets that will reproduce the rise and fall of a billow, or its flowing and ebbing. The idea and the verse rise together in the octave and in the sestet fall back again." Wordsworth wrote both kinds; in some the idea flows through the octave and may change anywhere in the sestet, in others idea and verse rise together in the octave and fall back in the sestet. Like Milton, Wordsworth's sonnets have a serious theme and generally expressed spiritual emotion.

The World Is Too Much With Us is most typical of Wordsworth and may be said to express his poetic creed—that nature and man were made by God for each other and should be in harmony.

The world is too much with us: late and
 soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our
 powers;
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid
 boon!
 This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,
 And are upgathered now like sleeping
 flowers;

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not.—Great God, I'd rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less
 forlorn;

Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

The greatest poets of the nineteenth century were not sonnet writers in any sense; but two minor poets, Rosetti and Mrs. Browning, wrote sonnets which are considered by many critics to be the best poems of their type in the language.

Mrs. Browning was pre-eminently a sonnet writer, for her best known and probably best liked poems are the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. They are a cycle of love sonnets written to Robert Browning shortly before their marriage. After they were married she gave them to him, and he had them published under the title which might lead one to think they are translations. However, they are original work, and it is interesting to note that their form is something like that of Shakespeare's love sonnets written several centuries before. Their rime scheme follows the Italian: abba abba cd cd cd is frequently found, but like Shakespeare's many of them rise to a climax in the last line. Each sonnet tells of some phase in the progress of her love for Robert Browning. Stedman regards the opening sonnet, *I Thought How Once Theocritus Had Sung*, as equal to any in the language; and Crawshaw says of them, "Mrs. Browning's masterpiece, the work that best illustrates all of her poetic powers, is her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. It is a sonnet cycle enshrining to a poetic immortality her love for Robert Browning. The title is a mere veil or fanciful disguise; for the poems are all original, personal, and intimate. The whole number of the sonnets is fifty-four, and the series illustrates different phases in the progress of her passion. She records how love came to her as she stood expecting death, how she feared to look so high, or to accept such bliss, how her love bade her rather prepare for renunciation, how she found her supreme joy at last in acceptance and self-surrender." The next to the last is probably the best known.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways-
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and
 height
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
 For ends of being and ideal grace.
 I love thee to the level of everyday's
 Most quiet need, by sun and candle light.
 I love thee freely as men strive for right;
 I love thee purely as they turn from praise;
 I love thee with the passion put to use
 In my old griefs, and with my childhood's
 faith;
 I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
 With my lost saints, I love thee with the
 breath,
 Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God
 choose,
 I shall but love thee better after death.

Rosetti is considered by many authorities to be one of the very greatest sonnet writers. He is perhaps the only English poet who followed the Italian exactly. Alden says of him, "Notwithstanding that most of our great English poets of modern times have written sonnets, perhaps only Rosetti (who was of Italian stock) found in the formally correct sonnet the natural expression of his lyrical impulse." Alden also quotes Professor Lewis, who compares Rosetti with Wordsworth, and says,—"Nevertheless I prefer Rosetti's strictness, and regard him as the greatest master of the sonnet form."

Rosetti wrote in all a hundred and fifty sonnets, many of which are included in the cycle, *The House of Life*. Long says that they deserve to rank with Mrs. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and with Shakespeare's *Sonnets* as one of the three great cycles of love poems in our language. Others are written for pictures. They are often obscure but always beautiful. Stedman says of Rosetti, "As a sonneteer he has no living equal. Take the group written for pictures and read *Mary Magdalen*. It is a complete dramatic poem. The series belonging to *The House of Life* is such as this man alone can produce. Mrs. Browning's sonnets were the deathless revelation of her own beautiful soul; if these are more objective they are equally perfect in another way."

It has been said that really great sonnet writers are few. This is true and yet many poets who can not be termed great sonnet writers have written a few good sonnets. Among the minor sonnet writers Wyatt and Surrey deserve mention, for they introduced

this form into England. Sir Philip Sidney wrote a sequence entitled *Astrophel and Stella*. They were addressed to Lady Penelope Devereaux, to whom Sidney had once been betrothed. Long says of them, "They abound in exquisite lines and passages containing more poetic feeling and expression than the songs of any minor writer of the age." Edmund Spencer is another Elizabethan who wrote a few good sonnets. Like many of the older writers he shows considerable latitude in form. His sonnets are composed of three quatrains linked together and ending with a final couplet, ab ab bc bc cd cd ee. This form has been rarely used by other poets; Sidney's and Spencer's sonnets may be linked with Shakespeare's as the best examples in our language of that early type of sonnets in which love was the conventional theme.

During the Elizabethan age every poet and courtier tried his hand at sonnet writing, but between that time and the Victorian age sonnets became less popular and fewer were written, though some of them are among the best in the language. Keats and Shelly each wrote several good sonnets: Keat's *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer* is especially well known. Later still Longfellow wrote several very beautiful sonnets, which are among his finest poems. Like Rosetti he was familiar with the Italian and this may have had some influence.

Today many of the modern poets are writing sonnets, and some of the best of the war poems are in this form. Mr. John Masefield, one of the foremost English poets, follows the Elizabethan style, but in general present day poets tend toward the Italian.

Many attempts have been made to define a sonnet, both in prose and verse, but the most interesting of these definitions are sonnets on the sonnet. They are sonnets in form and content and in addition tell what a sonnet should be. Well known poets have attempted this literary stunt, notably Wordsworth, who wrote one called *Scorn Not the Sonnet*, and Rosetti, who defined the sonnet in one called, *A Sonnet Is A Moment's Melody*. However, R. W. Gilder, a poet who is not particularly well known, has written one of the best:

What is a sonnet? 'Tis a pearly shell
 That murmurs of the far off murmuring sea,

A precious jewel carved most curiously.
 It is a little picture painted well.
 What is a sonnet? 'Tis a tear that fell
 From a great poet's hidden ecstasy;
 A two-edged sword, a star, a song—
 ah me!
 Sometimes a heavy tolling funeral bell.
 This was the flame that shook Dante's breath,
 The solemn organ whereon Milton
 played,
 And the clear glass where Shakes-
 peare's shadow falls;
 A sea this is, beware who ventureth!
 For like a fiord the narrow floor is
 laid
 Deep as midocean to sheer mountain
 walls.

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