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"Elizabethan Sonneteers"

Sonnet originated in Italy during fourteenth century. The pioneer leaders were Petrarch and Dante. During sixteenth century sonnet spread to Spain and France. It was during this century that it entered England through Wyatt and Surrey. The Renaissance period is said to be the golden period for poems, dramas and other literary productions. Youthful freshness and vigour mark the poetry of this period.

"Bliss was it in that dawn
to be alive,
But to be young was very
heaven."

In the very beginning poems were composed occasionally. By the time we reach the period of Spenser and Sidney, occasional composition had stopped and there were regular composition of verses and we started hearing the "sweet, spontaneous and full throated" music of songs.

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A new wave in English poetry came with the imitation of Italian models but ~~with~~ with them came new difficulties too. Thomas Wyatt and his friend and disciple Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey were the first imitators whose work 'Tottel's Miscellany' has verses which mark the first English poetry of Renaissance. In other words, the poetry of the age begins with the publication of the above-mentioned book. Thomas Wyatt, who travelled to Italy, was the first man to introduce sonnet in England. It is true that he composed his sonnets on Italian models but at the same time this is also true that he experimented much in metrical variety. Surrey was his disciple and not an independent force but his sonnets are more effective than those of Wyatt. Wyatt imitated Petrarch with some modifications which later on was seized upon

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by Shakespeare in the splendid sonnet sequence. A.C. Rickett pays a glowing tribute to these sonneteers by saying that "Surrey and Wyatt stand in relation to the glory of English poetry under Spenser and Shakespeare as Thomson and Collins do to Wordsworth and Shelley."

Wyatt wrote no memorable sonnets but blazed the track and left behind him thirtyone love sonnets of rare excellence and beauty. Surrey, on the other hand, did not accept the Italian models as adopted by Wyatt but gave a new turn to the sonnet which later on Shakespeare used with grace and ease. Surrey's sonnets are love sonnets on Geraldine or Lady Elizabeth Fitzgerald marked with melancholic tone. He wrote im- personal sonnets also marked by a note of cynicism and satire. The wave of sonnet writing in England was brief but prolific.

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It was headed by Watson's 'The Hecatompethia' or 'passionate controversy of Love' published in 1582. The poems are not regular sonnets of fourteen lines but of eighteen lines divided into three stanzas. The work is conventional and the source is French or Italian. Sonnet once again went into oblivion for some time till the coming of Sir Philip Sidney who emerged on the scene with his 'Astrophel and Stella', containing one hundred and eight sonnets and eleven songs. There is a strong personal element in the sonnet. Astrophel is Sidney himself and Stella is Penelope Devereux who afterwards make an unhappy marriage. The criticisms of Lamb and Hazlitt on the sonnets of Sidney are diametrically opposed. The former regards the sonnets as the product of a transcendent passion and there are signs of love but the latter regards them

as the product of deliberate labour. They have frigidities and stiffness in them. Though the general modern view shows an inclination towards Lamb, the views of Hazlitt cannot outrightly be rejected. Some of the Sonnets of Sidney are so marked by simplicity and spontaneity that many critics regard them better than those of Shakespeare. The second poet of well repute is Edmund Spenser. His 'Amoretti', a sequence of eighty eight Sonnets addressed to a lady, who later on become his wife, deserves a place just below the Sonnets of Sidney. Actually Spenser had preceded Sidney in the field of Sonnet writing by his experiments entitled 'The vision of Bellamy' and 'The visions of Petrarch'. They were imitative of French models and failed to attract any notice. The skill of Spenser is more rem-

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available which has been able to link together the separate ~~parts~~ quatrains of English sonnet by his special rhyme ~~scheme~~ or scheme - ab, bc, bc, cd, cd, ee.

Another sonneteer of this period is Henry Constable who wrote his sonnet sequence and christened the sequence by the name of Diana. Shakespeare was another great sonneteer of the age. In 1609 a collection of Shakespeare's sonnets was printed by Thomas Thorpe, who dedicated the volume to one W.H. who has been identified as William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. 154 sonnets have been addressed to W.H. and a Dark Lady. Michael Drayton's idea appeared in 1594 and ultimately became the microcosm of entire sonnetting convention and its numerous tricks and turns. Three qualities of Drayton's sonnets are (i) delicate play of fancy, (ii) curious

learning and (iii) occasional touches of coarseness. The Sonnets have dramatic elements too in them. In spite of all these qualities the bulk of these Sonnets cannot be said to be one of the finest of the age. One thing very remarkable is that occasionally he attains the manly dignity of Wyatt and a refinement of style which the great pioneers have rarely achieved. Daniel is another Sonneteer who wrote 'Delia' which lacks warmth of genuine emotion. The qualities of his Sonnets are (i) style, (ii) simplicity, (iii) purity of diction, (iv) occasionally rhetorical and (v) correctness of diction. His popular anthology piece, entitled 'Care Charmer Sleep' shows that occasionally he can also reach the level of excellence. According to Rickett "Daniel, no less than Drayton, did for Shakespeare's ~~sonnets~~

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Sonnetteering much what Marlowe did for his blank verse." Other sonneteers of this period are Thomas Campion whose 'Book of Airs' in which he defends national tradition against Italianism is a collection of simple, strange, sensuous and passionate songs. Barnfield's twenty sonnets appended to his adulterary 'Cynthia' are remarkable in the sense that like many of the sonnets of Shakespeare, they too are addressed to a youth named Gargamelle. It is true that the sonnets are imitative in character, but are marked by a great ardour of passion. Thomas Lodge's 'Phyllis', Fulke Greville's 'Caesica' and Fletcher's 'Lycia' are also worth mentioning.

Some of the salient features of Elizabethan sonnets are

- (i) the sonnets of the Elizabethan age are marked by flights of imagination.
- (ii) the sonnets of the period have

mostly love themed.

- (iii) the sonnets show that the sonneteers were masters of the art of versification.
- (iv) the sonnets were addressed to an actual lady or lady of imagination.
- (v) the sonneteers coming after Sidney rarely used Petrarchan form.

No age has ever witnessed such an outburst of sonnets. The period was brief - the last decade of the sixteenth century but the production great.

The end.

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