

**A History of the Sonnet
in England:
“A little world made cunningly”**

von

Jochen Petzold

ERICH SCHMIDT VERLAG

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Weitere Informationen zu diesem Titel finden Sie im Internet unter
ESV.info/978-3-503-20539-4

Umschlagabbildung, v. l. n. r.:

John Donne: Isaac Oliver © Wikimedia Commons/NPG; William Shakespeare © Wikimedia Commons; Charlotte Turner Smith: George Romney © Wikimedia Commons (überarbeitet und ergänzt durch Erich Schmidt Verlag); Elizabeth Barrett Browning © Wikimedia Commons; Rupert Brooke © Wikimedia Commons; Patience Agbabi: Amithkumarmcak9 © Wikimedia Commons

Gedrucktes Werk: ISBN 978-3-503-20539-4

eBook: ISBN 978-3-503-20540-0

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

© Erich Schmidt Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin 2022

www.ESV.info

Druck: docupoint, Barleben

Some helped in small ways, some helped me always.
Some cheered me on when I ran out of fight.
(Ken Hicks)

Many people have helped me to write this book, and thanks are due: to the participants of two seminars at the University of Regensburg, for reading and discussing early modern and Victorian sonnets with me; to Chris, for locating obscure sources; to Isabella and Ralf, for sharing their expertise on French and Italian culture; to Daniel, Dieter, Julia, Lisa, and Marco, for their corrections, comments, and suggestions; and to Silke and Sara, for unwavering support. Thank you!

Preface

What is a *Sonnet*? 'T is a form of poem
Of fourteen lines; disposed in two quatrains,
With but two rhymes, of corresponding strains,
Alternate rhymed, or as here framed to show 'em:
And two tercets (or triplets, as we know 'em)
Arranged at will; for here a choice obtains
'Tween twice three ways; but (so its law ordains)
Into successive couplets ne'er to throw 'em.

The subject any; but, whate'er it be,
In one full thought, clear-claus'd, and blemish-free,
With a beginning, middle, and an end.
This, clearly, only given as a sample
Of its mere mechanism; both to blend,
And illustrating precept by example.

(Russell 1898, p. 15)

What is a sonnet? In the preceding poem, Montague Montagu (1787–1863) focusses on formal features, and while some of the claims he makes may be open to debate, the poem itself is indubitably a sonnet. Many poets have asked themselves the same question, and answered it, like Montagu, in the form of sonnets – the Rev. Matthew Russell collected 157 examples in the anthology *Sonnets on the Sonnet* (1898). Of course, not all of these poems are solely concerned with form. Rather, we learn from them that the sonnet is “a moment’s monument” (Dante Gabriel Rossetti), “a wave of melody” (Theodore Watts-Dunton), “a fruit which long has slept”, “a gem”, “a medal of pure gold” (John Addington Symonds), “an epic in short space compressed” (Thomas Auld), a “small lute”, a “pipe”, a “trumpet”, and the “key” that Shakespeare gave us to “unlock his heart” (William Wordsworth); but we are also told that the sonnet is “a small thing” (Edward Creamer), “but cunning artifice”, a “puppet, fashioned in elder days” (Julia Dorr), “a toy” or “careless metric pastime” (Allen Upward). The sonnet has been praised as “the cornerstone of English poetry” (Crosland 1926, p. 29), but it has also been denigrated as inconsequential and trivial. However, a sonnet can be “a little world made cunningly”, as the subtitle to this book suggests. The quote is taken from a sonnet by John Donne (2010, p. 533, l. 1), where it refers to the speaker, not the poem, but it seems to me to be an apt phrase to describe the sonnet.

This book is not particularly concerned with the formal aspect of the question “What is a *Sonnet?*”, although a typology of the genre’s major strands will be offered in the first chapter. My assumption is that most people interested enough in poetry to pick up this volume recognize a sonnet when they see one. Rather, my intention is to sketch a history of English sonneteering (with a few examples from other parts of the United Kingdom also appearing), from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first. For whatever the merits of individual sonnets, the poetic form is certainly an eminent cultural phenomenon. Invented in the thirteenth century, its growing popularity throughout Western Europe was largely based on the reception and imitation of Francesco Petrarca’s *Canzoniere* and its hyperbolic depiction of both longing and anguish caused by an impossible love for an idealized Lady. By the middle of the sixteenth century, Petrarchism and the sonnet form had spread from Italy through Spain, Portugal, and France, and had reached the court of Henry VIII in England. In the last decade of the sixteenth century, a sonnet sequence craze swept the island, but by the time John Milton wrote his sonnets some fifty years later, the form had dropped in popularity. It would seem that the sonnet form then lay dormant for roughly a hundred years, only to erupt into a new flowering in the late eighteenth century – a flowering that was to grow into a veritable ‘sonnetomania’ during the nineteenth century. This craze has abated, but the genre is still productive; according to Paul Oppenheimer it “remains to this day the oldest poetic form still in wide popular use” (1989, p. 3).

In the following, I will chart the history of the sonnet in Britain, putting special emphasis on sonnet sequences (understood as groups of sonnets by a single author, connected by theme and/or published under a common title). Given the vast number of poets who have written sonnets since the sixteenth century, and the incalculable number of sonnets they produced, this book must needs be selective. Of course, major writers will not be ignored, but it is my intention to also include some lesser-known poets. Chapters are arranged chronologically, and they present a selection of authors and their work as case studies.

Note on the texts

The presentation of the poems on the page (indentations, line spacing) follows that of the source used (usually the first edition). In texts from the early modern period, I have sometimes modernized spelling. Where individual words are glossed, they are underlined and the explanation is printed in the same line, to the right of the body of the poem, in italics and after a square bracket. For easy identification, the titles of sonnet sequences discussed are printed in SMALL CAPITALS. Many sonnets do not have titles; poems without titles are usually referred to by their first lines.

Table of Contents

Preface	7
1. Introduction	11
1.1 The Invention of the Sonnet	11
1.2 Forms of the Sonnet	15
1.2.1 The Italian Sonnet	15
1.2.2 The English or Shakespearean Sonnet	17
1.2.3 Formal Variation and the Sonnet in English	21
1.3 Who is the ‘I’ of the Sonnet?.....	22
2. The Early Modern Period	25
2.1 The Sonnet Comes to England	25
2.1.1 Sir Thomas Wyatt	27
2.1.2 Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey	32
2.1.3 Tottel’s <i>Miscellany</i>	35
2.2 The Sonnet Sequence Craze of the 1590s.....	37
2.2.1 Sonnet Sequences before Philip Sidney	37
2.2.2 Sir Philip Sidney.....	40
2.2.3 Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, and Edmund Spenser	51
2.3 William Shakespeare	63
2.3.1 Sonnets in Shakespeare’s Plays.....	63
2.3.2 Shakespeare’s <i>Sonnets</i>	66
2.4 Lady Mary Wroth	79
2.5 John Donne and George Herbert	85
2.6 John Milton	94
3. The Long Eighteenth Century	101
3.1 Mid-Century: Thomas Edwards, Charles Emily, and Thomas Gray	102
3.2 The 1780s: Charlotte Smith and William Lisle Bowles	108
3.2 The 1790s: Mary Robinson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.....	114
3.4 William Wordsworth	129
3.5 Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats	141

Table of Contents

4. The Victorian Period	153
4.1 Amatory Sonnet Sequences	154
4.1.1 Elizabeth Barrett Browning	154
4.1.2 George Meredith	159
4.1.3 Dante Gabriel Rossetti	165
4.1.4 Christina Rossetti	171
4.1.5 Wilfrid Scawen Blunt	176
4.2 Devotional Sonnets	183
4.3 Family Relations	194
4.4 Town and Country	201
4.5 Travel	205
4.6 Politics and Social Change	211
4.7 War and Empire	216
5. 1914 to 1945	227
5.1 The ‘Great War’: Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen	227
5.2 Between the Wars: W. H. Auden	237
5.3 The Second World War	244
6. From Mid-20th Century to the Present	251
6.1 Francis Warner	251
6.2 Seamus Heaney	254
6.3 George MacBeth	260
6.4 George Szirtes	265
6.5 Patience Agbabi	270
7. Epilogue	275
8. Bibliography of Works Quoted or Consulted	277
8.1 Primary Sources	277
8.2 Secondary Sources	281
9. Index	287
9.1 Poets and their Works	287
9.2 Poems and Sequences	291