

Elizabethan Lyrics and Songs

Next to the drama, the lyric is the chief glory of the Elizabethan era. It is the golden age of the lyrics as well as of the drama. Greene, Lodge, Drayton, Compion, Daniel, Dyer, etc., are some of the foremost lyricists of the age. Elizabethan songs and lyrics were published in collections or miscellanies, the model for which was provided by Tottel's Miscellany, 1558. The Paradise of Dainty Devices, The Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant inventions, England's Helicon, The Passionate Pilgrim etc, are only a few of such anthologies as continued to appear all through the age.

The Sonnet and Sonneteers

Wyatt had imported the sonnet from Italy and Surrey had invented the English form of the sonnet. Their songs and sonnets were published together in Tottel's Miscellany in 1556. However, the technical peculiarity of the sonnet was not realised in the earlier years of Elizabeth's reign. The word "sonnet" was used indifferently for any short lyric. The sonnet proper remained forgotten and neglected till the publication in 1591 of Sidney's sonnet-sequence called *Astrophel and Stella*. They express Sidney's passion for Penelope, who was by that time the wife of Lord Rich.

The publication of the *Astrophel and Stella* at once caught the imagination of the people and gave rise to the vogue of the sonnet. Sonnets were written merely because it was the fashion to write sonnets, and not because the poets had some really felt passion to express. They merely echo the sighs and love-pangs of Petrarch and the Petrarchans.

However, sincerity is also the keynote of Spenser's *Amoretti* (an Italian name), a collection of about 88 sonnets. They express Spenser's love and courtship of Elizabeth Boyle, the lady who became his wife shortly afterwards

Their chief Characteristics are;

- (1) In form, they consist of three quatrains followed by a couplet, linked together by an artistic arrangement of lines.
- (2) They express the pure love of a betrothed lover about to marry his lady and thus differ from the Petrarchan convention of a lover expressing his love for a married lady.

While the sonnets of Sidney and Spenser form the very core of their poetic work, Shakespeare's sonnets were written in moments snatched from work for the theatre. His 154 sonnets were first published in 1609, and as Wordsworth has put it, it was with this key that the poet unlocked his heart.

Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare are the greatest sonnet writers of the Elizabethan era. Next to them stand Samuel Daniel and Michael Drayton. Daniels sonnet sequence *Delia* is remarkable for its purity of language and correctness of versification.

Main Characteristics of Elizabethan Sonnet

1. Foreign Influences: The Elizabethan sonnets were influenced by Italian and French poets and poetic convention. Petrarch and many of his Italian imitators were rediscovered. He and his Italian disciples exerted, at the close of Elizabeth's reign, the most powerful influence on Elizabethan sonneteers. Petrarch's sonnets are love sonnets based on the theme of his love for Laura. This typical theme with stock phrases, images and other conventions was imitated to the full in Elizabethan period.

Secondly, French sonneteers — Ronsard, Desportes, and Du Bellay— , who were influenced by the Italian sonnets, infused a new vigour into the writing of sonnets. They greatly inspired Elizabethan sonneteers. Grierson Smith remarks: "All of them were pipers of Petrarch's woes, sighing the strains of Ronsard or more often of Desportes."

2. Variety of Themes: Elizabethan sonnets were written on a variety of themes, the two main subjects being love and religion. Love was the most important theme. Love was mostly of the conventional type.

Some Eminent Elizabethan Sonneteers

1. Thomas Watson. He was the earliest Elizabethan to make a reputation as a sonneteer. His work is historically of great value as marking the progress and scope of foreign influences. In early life, Watson translated all Petrarch's sonnets into Latin, but only two specimens of his rendering survive. This laborious

undertaking formed the prelude to his sonneteering efforts in English. In 1582, he published one hundred "passions" or "poems of love" which were described as sonnets, though with rare exceptions they were each eighteen lines long.

2. Sir Philip Sidney. The publication of Sidney's sonnet sequence, entitled *Astrophel and Stella*, in 1591, marks the real beginning of Elizabethan sonnet. His sonnets clearly show the influence of Watson, Petrarch and Ronsard. Sidney was the first English poet to indicate the lyric capacity of the sonnet. Sidney followed the Petrarchan scheme of sonnet. His example was followed by many, especially by Daniel in *Delia*, Constable in *Diana*, Drayton in *Idea* and Spenser in *Amoretti*.

3. Edmund Spenser. Spenser broke new ground in sonnet writing with the publication of *Amoretti*, a collection of 88 sonnets. They are addressed to Elizabeth Boyle, who became his wife. Spenser's sonnets familiarised the Elizabethan reader with a classical conceit, which Pindar among the Greeks, and Horace and Virgil among the Latins had notably glorified.

4. Shakespeare. Shakespeare's sonnets "are the most precious pearls of Elizabethan lyricism, some of them unsurpassed by any lyricism". The majority of the sonnets were written probably in 1594, when Shakespeare had gained the patronage of the Earl of Southampton. The form he chose was not the Italian form. He preferred the Spenserian pattern, consisting of three decasyllabic quatrains, each rhyming alternately, and rhyming couplet to conclude. Thomas Thorpe printed a collection of 154 sonnets of Shakespeare in 1609. It was dedicated to a certain "Mr. W.H." and to a "Dark Lady".

5. Henry Constable. Constable's sonnets are remarkable for melody, beauty and Spenser's sensuous charm.

6. Daniel. He was endowed with a lyric quality of a brilliant order. He was influenced by foreign poets, especially by Tasso. Daniel's collection of sonnets, known as *Delia*, is based on the conventional theme of love and has stock devices of contemporary sonnet writing.

7. Minor Sonneteers. The other sonnet writers were translators and poor imitators of Petrarch and Ronsard. Lodge's *Phyllis*, Fletcher's *Tears of Fancy*, Percy's *Celia*, Lynch's *Dillia* and Smith's *Choloris* are poor in stuff and purely imitative in character.

Some Scottish poets also attempted sonnet writing. Sir William Alexander, whose 106 sonnets were published in 1604, followed the Italian and French pattern.

Conclusion: The age of Shakespeare was the golden age of sonnet. It contains an inexhaustible treasure of sonnets which poets of all succeeding ages used with great skill. Each poet contributed something new to the art of sonnet writing. The renowned poets who enriched sonnet writing are Milton, Waller, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Arnold, Rossetti and many others.

Elizabethan age was rich in poetry, though its dramatic literature was richer. Shakespeare was not only the greatest dramatist but also the greatest poet of the Elizabethan age. The Elizabethan period, particularly the period from 1580 to 1603, is the golden age of the Renaissance. The period from 1550 to 1580 is the formative and imitative period of Elizabethan poetry. Tottel's *Miscellany* is a landmark of lyrical poems, "*Songs and Sonnets*" was published. It is popularly known as Tottel's *Miscellany* after the name of the printer. It showed a new note of lyricism. There was the urge for expressing personal feelings in innumerable songs and sonnets. Elizabethan Lyrics and Sonnets.

Elizabethan age has been described as the age of songs and lyrics; it was the nest of singing birds. The impulse towards the free expression of personal feelings naturally led to the creation of new lyrical forms that sought to capture the rhythm of the personal emotions. These verse-forms tried to express adequately a variety of feelings and emotions that sought expression. It marked the dawn of the humanist poetry with its emphasis on passions, emotions and far-flung imaginative aspirations. In the Elizabethan age. "England, merry England became a nest of singing birds."

The first considerable early Elizabethan poets were Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Earl of Surrey (1517-47). The contemporary critic Puttenham called them "two chief lanterns of light" They had traveled in Italy and greatly polished

‘our rude and homely manner of vulgar poesie... “Both of them expounded the resources of the language by translating freely from the literary works of Italy and France. Wyatt, who spent some years in France and Italy like Chaucer, imitated literary forms that he found there. He wrote lyrics in the courtly tradition.

Elizabethan Lyrics and Sonnets.

Though his themes were conventional, they were expressed with a direct simplicity and intensity. Wyatt’s typical poem is a series of lyric cries, artfully repeated and modulated and clinched by a refrain at the end of the stanza. Wyatt’s poems show that a new world was opening for poetry. Wyatt introduced the sonnet into English poetry. He was the first English poet to use Dante’s stanza rima (aba-bcb-cdc etc.) and ottava rima in English.

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