

A Note on The Elizabethan Sonnet Tradition

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The term sonnet is derived from the Italian word 'sonetto'. The term might have originated from Old Provençal sonnet which means a little poem or song or from the Latin word 'sonus' which denotes a sound. By the thirteenth century, the sonnet came to denote a short poem of fourteen lines, governed by certain prescribed rules in the general structure and in the disposition of rhymes. Petrarch, the Italian poet was the first to write and popularise the sonnet form. The typical Petrarchan sonnet is a love song where the poet laments about his unrequited love for his lady love, Laura. The typical Petrarchan sonnet is structurally divided into two parts—the first eight lines called the octave and the last six lines called sestet. There is a clearly marked pause in the idea after the eighth line. The rhyme scheme may be represented as abba, abba in the octave and cde, cde or cd cd cd in sestet. The sonnet was first inducted into England by Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey. Wyatt wrote thirty-nine sonnets in the strict Petrarchan model and made it the vehicle of his direct expression of personal feeling without recourse to fiction or allegory. Ten of these sonnets were translations from Petrarch. He is more or less a piper of Petrarch's woes and the atmosphere of imitation hangs over them. Nevertheless these sonnets for the first time introduced personal note and experience in poetry and herein lies Wyatt's great service to English poetry. Surrey too sang in his sonnets his entirely imaginary love for Geraldine or Lady Elizabeth of Fitzerland. The elegiac note is natural for him. His love for nature is genuine and with happy effects he mingled descriptions of nature with love complaints in his sonnets. However the Earl of Surrey experimented with the traditional structure of the sonnet which was to become the English form of the sonnet. The English form of the sonnet was made up of three stanzas of four lines each rhyming alternately and a concluding couplet.