

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE IV.

THE ENGLISH SONNET — THE SONNETS OF  
SHAKESPEARE.

BY PROFESSOR THEODORE W. HUNT, PH.D., LITT. D.,  
PRINCETON, N. J.

ONE of the later and best of English sonneteers thus writes upon the excellence of the sonnet:—

“Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,  
Mindless of its just honours; with this key  
Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody  
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch’s wound;  
A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;  
Camöens soothed with it an exile’s grief;  
The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf  
Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned  
His visionary brow: a glow-worm lamp,  
It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land  
To struggle through dark ways; and, when a damp  
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand  
The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew  
Soul-animating strains—alas, too few!”

These lines and the additional sonnets which Wordsworth wrote are sufficient to indicate his personal and literary estimate of their value and the high place they sustain in developing English verse. Involving all known poetic forms, the epic, dramatic, lyric, descriptive, and didactic; expressing all the varied feelings of the human heart, and related historically to the consecutive growth of English and Continental Letters, they not only make a claim on the attention of the literary student, but well repay that attention by the manner in which they minister to literary art and taste. The origin and earliest history of the English sonnet takes us back to the

twelfth century of Italian Letters, in the territory of Provence, and to the long list of Italian sonneteers — Dante, Petrarch, Alfieri, Tasso, Ariosto, and Boccaccio, some of whom, as Petrarch, did no better work than in this sphere, and all of whom, even Dante, intensified thereby the interest and profit of their work as poets. The sonnet was thus at home in Italy, and Italy's greatest poets were equally at home in its composition and interpretation. It was but natural, therefore, that in the reign of Henry the Eighth, at the opening of the sixteenth century, when Italian literature was in high repute in Europe and was exerting unwonted influence in English verse, the Sonnets of Petrarch and his contemporaries should come into prominence in England and directly modify the poetic product of the most notable authors of the time. This they did, and the impression is particularly noticeable in the poetry of Wyatt and Surrey. In fact, the oldest sonnet in English is a translation of one of Petrarch's by Wyatt — his co-worker (Surrey), however, excelling him in this particular form. Critics have naturally called attention to the fact that we have no sonnet distinctively from Chaucer, even though he was an Italian scholar, a resident for a time in Italy, acquainted especially with the poetry of Petrarch, whom, perhaps, he had seen in person, and strongly inclined, as a poet, to the subject of love and sentiment. For this singular result certain reasons have been assigned — that the connection of the English court, at the time, was closer with France than with Italy; that the great Italian sonneteers had not as yet become current in England, and that Chaucer's governing tendency in verse was toward the dramatic and descriptive rather than the lyrical. Be this as it may, the fact is that, though Chaucer exhibited, in some of his shorter poems, the substantive qualities of the sonnet as lyric, nothing of its ex-

ternal form is found. After the sonnet had been fairly introduced in the Elizabethan era, many poets of greater or lesser fame essayed it — Raleigh, Sidney, Spenser in his “*Amoretti*,” so suggestively Italian, Jonson and Drummond, and, later in the history, Milton, who especially illustrates the influence of South European models by writing some of his Sonnets in Italian. Such an example as “*The Massacre of Piedmont*” is directly suggestive of Italian civil and religious history.

As to the nature and structure of the sonnet, it may be said that there is no form of English verse more definite, and none for the violation of which there is less tolerance, among literary critics. Whatever its theme or general character, it must be short, as ode or ballad, canto or idyll, made up specifically of fourteen lines, divided into the major and minor sections, of eight and six lines respectively (the octave and sextette), there being two rhymes in the one and three in the other, the rhymes differing in the two divisions. These conditions are rigorous. As has been said, “The requirements of the drama, nay, even of the epic, are not proportionately greater.” “The steadiness of hand,” writes Forman, “and clearness of mind required for rounding into the invariable limit of fourteen iambic lines some weighty matter of thought or delicate subtlety of feeling is not easy to overrate.” Thus the form as well as the character of our English sonnet has been taken from the Italian. So, it might seem, at first sight, that a structure so imperious and rigid would not be a popular one either with author or reader. The reverse has been found to be true, its very definiteness acting as a protection against undue poetic license, and holding the poet closely to the fundamental law that it shall have one leading idea, with a free variety of rhyme.

It is thus that Wordsworth, in a sonnet on the sonnet, justifies this accepted form as a helpful restriction:—

“Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room;  
 And hermits are contented with their cells;  
 And students with their pensive citadels;  
 Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,  
 Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,  
 High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,  
 Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:  
 In truth, the prison, unto which we doom  
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence to me,  
 In sundry moods, ’twas pastime to be bound  
 Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground;  
 Pleased if some souls (for such there needs must be)  
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,  
 Should find short solace there, as I have found.”

Here and there, as in Milton, there is a departure from the prescribed form as to lines and metre, but never a departure from this law of unity and continuity of idea. As to possible deviation of structure, there are two types that may be said to have both foreign and native sanction. The one is that which contains three regular quatrains and a couplet, as in Coleridge and Shakespeare. The other and more exceptional form contains in the major two kinds of quatrain—the regular (in which the first and third lines and the second and fourth rhyme) and the Tennysonian (in which the first and fourth and the second and third lines rhyme)—and in the minor has three alternately rhyming couplets, as in some of the Sonnets of Byron. From the fact that Shakespeare has used the first of these varying forms, it has become widely sanctioned, one of his collection (126) having but twelve lines, and one of them (145) having the tetrameter instead of the pentameter line. These deviations are allowed, on grounds of variety and final effect. It is thus that Matthew Arnold refers to Goethe approvingly as preferring substance to technique, or if we must have technique, that it be “or-

ganic and not conventional." No poetry can afford to emphasize unduly what has been called "the etiquette of form," the sacrifice of sense and sentiment to structure. In all literature, the creative must control the artistic and no law or method be so inflexible as never to allow of modification in the interests of truth and lasting effect. Here, again, Shakespeare evinced his poetic genius.

#### THE SONNETS OF SHAKESPEARE.

These, with the possible exception of Spenser's "Amoretti," are the only sonnets of special merit prior to Milton. We notice the first mention of them in 1598, in Meres's "Palladis Tamia," their first publication being in 1609, but a few years after the close of the reign of Elizabeth. Naturally, from their first appearance down to this day these poems have invited unwonted interest and study; partly, because of their intrinsic merit thus early in the history of English literature; and, mainly, because they are Shakespeare's, whose chief distinction lies within the separate province of dramatic verse. Thus we have extant a large body of Shakespearian Sonnet literature, quite apart from that pertaining to the Plays, every Shakespearian critic devoting some attention thereto, and writers such as Leigh Hunt and Massey, Palgrave and Dowden, giving special space to their discussion.

The number of his Sonnets is one hundred and fifty-four, probably produced between 1590 and 1605, though the exact period must always remain a matter of conjecture. So as to the one to whom they are addressed critical opinion has naturally varied, whether to a male or female friend, and, if to the former, whether to the Earl of Southampton or to Lord Pembroke. "It seems to me," writes Coleridge, "that the Sonnets could only have come from a man deeply in love, and

in love with a woman"; while the historian Hallam, on the contrary, affirms that such a notion is utterly "untenable." They have been referred to Raleigh as their object; to Elizabeth; to Hammet, Shakespeare's son; and to some imaginary person, male or female, their relation to Southampton having the weight of authority. So cautious a critic as Hudson thus writes: "It will take more than has as yet appeared to convince me that when the poet wrote these and similar lines his thoughts were traveling anywhere but home to the bride of his youth and the mother of his children." Even their authorship is in question, referred by some, as the Plays have been, to Bacon, and with as little reason. Raleigh, also, has been cited as the author. As to the subject-matter and purpose of the Sonnets, a still wider variety of view has been taken, a topic second to no other in its importance as determining their true place in English Letters.

The question that first arises is as to their autobiographical character. Have they such a character at all and, if so, to what extent? According to Dowden, this theory is invested with serious difficulties; while such a critic as Dyce concedes that a few of them, at least, may have such a bearing. Wordsworth's phrase that in them Shakespeare "unlocked his heart" has been pressed into the service of this theory. The theory, as a whole, is vitally connected with the question of the relation of the Sonnets to each other,—whether or not they are marked by unity and sequence, and were written by Shakespeare in serial form, and with reference to some leading purpose or chain of events. Modern criticism has substantially agreed as to the twofold division of the Sonnets: the first (1-125) addressed to some male friend, as Southampton; and the second (127-154) addressed to some female friend, "the dark-haired woman" of his love, the "mysterious

heroine," Sonnet 126, being an envoy, lying between the two divisions. In this classification, the autobiographical feature would be more prominent in the second section. Beyond this analysis, critics have found groups and subgroups of different members and orders, arranged largely on the basis of a more or less distant relation to the poet's life and history. Thus Browne divides them into six groups, all, save the last, being addressed to his friend the Earl of Pembroke, save those (127-152) to his female friend on her infidelity. Without exception, however, they are, as he holds, leaves from the life of the author. Others divide them into four groups. Some contend that the first of the two large groups is autobiographical, and the second, dramatic; while other critics argue that they are, throughout, fictitious and visionary. Here, again, the facts are so meager and untrustworthy that every intelligent reader must be left to his own judgment as to just how and to what extent the poet appears in them. In his Plays, as we know, he has succeeded in so concealing himself that the closest inspection has not been able to detect his personality. They are wholly impersonal and objective, and representative of human nature as such. Reasoning by analogy, we would not expect to find much, if any, of such personal reference in the Sonnets; while, on the other hand, they are the distinctive type of verse in which an author appears and expresses his innermost life. It would be natural, if Shakespeare, true to the genius of lyric poetry, had really "unlocked his heart." As to the subject-matter and purpose, a second view is, that the Sonnets are allegorical, addressing ideal manhood or dramatic art or the spirit of beauty, or, perchance, the poet's ideal self, or the reformed church of England, the "dark woman" of the closing Sonnets being the bride of the Canticles, the pure church of Christ. So



careful a critic as Fleay carried this mythical and metaphysical theory to the most pronounced extreme, making all the allusions subjective, even the poet's "lameness" referred to in Sonnet 89 being that of his verse.

It is clear that such an order of interpretation as this would know no rational bounds, the advocates of it being driven, perforce, to the wildest conjectures as to this or that sonnet and being quite unable in this visionary theory to unify the Sonnets in any acceptable manner. Moreover, the theory is entirely out of keeping with the personality and purpose of the poet, who, from first to last, dealt with realities in nature and the world and aimed directly at practical, objective ends. A third and more plausible theory effects a combination of the two already mentioned, finding in the Sonnets the historical and the imaginative, truth and romance, and so interacting as that each gives to the other something of its own character. This is the view of Gerald Massey, by which, as he thinks, he has untied all knots and reconciled all differences. According to this view, we have the historical element, in that the author addresses sonnets to Southampton as a friend; and then the romantic element, in that, at the Earl's request, he writes some, personating the Earl, to his much admired Elizabeth Vernon. Personating the lady, also, he writes, by the way of answer, similar sonnets of affection to the Earl. Here we have the union of fact and fiction, the insuperable difficulty being now to discriminate between the two, to assert where the historical ends and the allegorical begins, each reader being left to his own preference and method of interpretation. Hence, we resort to the view first broached, and hold, with such critics as Palgrave, Dowden, Furnivale, and Hallam, that the Sonnets express "his own feeling in his own person." Nor does this mean that every line and stanza is personal and

may be referred to some well-known incident or experience in the poet's life, but that the dominant element is the autobiographic one, so much so as to make all else secondary and compel us to explain it in accordance with the accepted theory. Moreover, this theory meets more difficulties than any other, has less difficulties of its own than any other, and is most fully in accord with the method of the Plays; for not only are the Historical Plays, so-called, historical, but such tragedies as "Hamlet" and "Othello" have a distinctive historical background and basis, while in nearly all of his dramatic work literature and life are conjoined, and the reader is never allowed long to wander in the territory of mere romance.

Turning now from the origin and purpose of the Sonnets to their intrinsic poetic quality, we note, first of all, their distinctive lyrical character. They are not only sonnets but lyric sonnets, "born," as Dowden states it, "of the union of heart and imagination"; penetrated, as Trench affirms, "with a repressed passion." It is this impassioned quality, "the sensuous and passionate" element of which Milton speaks, that first impresses the candid reader, so that he can be in no doubt as to what constitutes their leading features. Whether the lyric be somber or sportive; whether love rewarded or rejected be the theme; whether satisfaction or regret be the result of his reflections upon his own life, in every instance the key-note is lyric. In no part of Shakespeare's dramatic work is feeling so pronounced, the personal element in these poems being largely accountable for such a decided presence of the emotional. Autobiography naturally takes such a form. An additional feature is their mental vigor, "characterized," as Coleridge expresses it, "by boundless fertility of thought"; or, as Trench states it, "double-shotted with thought." This intellectual feature is well worth emphasizing, partly, to il-

illustrate the oft-forgotten connection between poetry and thought; and, partly, to maintain Shakespeare's repute as a thinker in verse and not a mere romanticist. This principle is especially important in the sphere of lyric verse and in the composition of the sonnet. Here, if anywhere, sentiment may find it easy to take the place of sense, or, at least, to control it. In the sonnet, where love is so naturally the theme, the temptation to the superficial and purely amatory is so strong that not a few of our sonneteers, as Sidney, have succumbed to it. Here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare is true to his best instincts; and while the Sonnets are not intellectual verse in the sense in which "Hamlet" and "Othello" are, they are sufficiently so to maintain the close relation of feeling to thought. As to each of these features, emotion and mental vigor, the Sonnets, of course, differ as do the Plays, some of them being more conspicuously good than others; while it may be said without question that the first and larger division (1-125) is by far the more intellectual of the two, the second section being more emotional and often to the borders of sensuous passion. Some of the more notable of the Sonnets are: the twenty-ninth, as it opens,—

"When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state";

the thirtieth, beginning—

"When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
I summon up remembrance of things past;  
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,  
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste";

the thirty-second, opening—

"If thou survive my well-contented day,  
When that churl death my bones with dust shall cover."

This is a sonnet of rare beauty, as we read:—

"Full many a glorious morning have I seen  
Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye."

So, the thirty-seventh :—

“As a decrepit father takes delight  
To see his active child do deeds of youth.”

In the fifty-fourth, we read :—

“O, how much more doth beauty beauteous seem,  
By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!”

In the sixty-sixth, we read :—

“Tir'd with all these, for restful death I cry.”

In the seventy-first, the poet sings :—

“No longer mourn for me when I am dead.”

In Sonnets 73, 91, 96, 97 and 116, we note exceptionally beautiful specimens. Few have been more often cited than the one hundred and forty-sixth—

“Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,  
Pressed by these rebel pow'rs that thee array.”

Apart from these examples, it should be remembered that, in many of the Sonnets which as a whole are not especially excellent, we find occasional lines of rare poetic beauty as well as of personal and historical interest. It is this feature which, as much as any other, makes these poems valuable, both on the literary and biographical side. Thus, in the second one, we read :—

“When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,  
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field.”

So, in the third :—

“Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee  
Calls back the lovely April of her prime.”

In the twenty-third, we read :—

“O, learn to read what silent love hath writ.”

In the twenty-ninth, we note the oft-quoted line—

“Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope.”

In the thirty-first, are the lines :—

“How many a holy and obsequious tear  
Hath dear religious love stol'n from mine eye.”

In the sixtieth, we have the choice couplet :—

“Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end.”

In the seventy-third, are the lines:—

“In me thou seest the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,”

and the exquisite line—

“Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.”

In the ninety-seventh, we note:—

“How like a winter hath my absence been  
From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!”

Thus the lines run on with varying beauty and force, notable enough, however, to give Shakespeare the honor of being a lyric as well as a dramatic poet, and to place these poems in the list with Milton’s and Wordsworth’s as marking the highest lyrical level reached in the English sonnet.

A series of Open Questions as to Shakespeare and his Sonnets arises from this survey, and we inquire:—

1. As to the rival poet of whom he so sadly speaks. Criticism has adduced a long list of names, as Spenser, Marlowe, Drayton, Daniel, Chapman, and others, and an unsettled question it remains.

2. As to the “dark-haired woman” of the closing Sonnets,—the “master-mistress of his passion.” Who she was, what her character was, what her relations to Shakespeare and his rival poet were, and what the purpose of thus addressing her in verse in terms of such endearment and rebuke, are queries “ill to solve.” Possibly she was Southampton’s Elizabeth Vernon, or Sidney’s Stella, the disappointed Lady Rich and the object of Pembroke’s regard as a rival suitor.

3. A closely related and more general question pertains to the personal character of the poet as thus revealed, whether good or bad, whether socially praiseworthy or doubtful, a question forced upon the critic by the second section of the Sonnets.

Thus in one of them (142) he writes: "Love is my sin," and in another (144):—

"Two loves I have of comfort and despair  
Which like two spirits do suggest (tempt) me still;  
The better angel is a man right fair,  
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.  
To win me soon to hell."

It is thus that Dowden insists, "We must believe that Shakespeare at some time of his life was influenced by a woman, a woman faithless to her vow in wedlock." It is indeed this struggle between his better and his baser self that we have given us in this second series (126-154), with the probable result that the better self prevailed. In fine, the picture of the poet's character in the Sonnets is not altogether inviting. It is that of "The Rape of Lucrece" and "Venus and Adonis," rather than that of "Cymbeline" and "The Tempest"; and yet all praise is due him for the brave struggle that he waged in an age when it was easy enough to yield and to fall, nor do we know in literature of a more suggestive example of moral struggle than this one of the Sonnets, even though they disclose the weaker side of the author's character.

4. A further question would run as follows: Do they increase the poet's fame as a poet? Here, again, there is a wide diversity of view. "It is impossible," says Hallam, "not to wish that Shakespeare had never written them," an opinion to which Palgrave objects. Viewing the subject impartially, we must insist that the Sonnets, either on their personal or literary side, would be greatly missed. There are enough stanzas of merit and scattered lines of genuine verse to reveal the poet's lyric art, and thus to widen out the already comprehensive scope of his genius. Not to be compared with the Plays, they are still unique, and, to this extent, indicative of genius. Because Milton in "Samson Agonistes" fails to

reach the level of "Comus," or "Paradise Lost," we do not press the principle of destructive criticism to its limit, but aim to reach the measure of average excellence. So we deal with Tennyson as a dramatist and lyricist. That Shakespeare wrote sonnets at all is somewhat surprising, and equally so that he wrote them as well as he did.

A study of the later sonnets of our literature as thus opened is made especially inviting, on through the work of Milton and Byron, Keats and Wordsworth, down to the close of the nineteenth century, and the opening of the twentieth, not omitting their examination as revealed in the pages of our own American poets. It was our gifted American poet Gilder who asks, and answers for us, the question as to this particular form of verse:—

"What is a sonnet? 'T is the pearly shell  
That murmurs of the far-off murmuring sea;  
A precious jewel carved most curiously;  
It is a little picture painted well.  
It is the tear that fell  
From a great poet's hidden ecstasy."