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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-claused, 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 'sonnettomania' 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.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Invention of the Sonnet

The sonnet is old, but it is not ancient. Unlike the elegy, the hymn or the ode, it is not a classical poetic genre. Rather, it was invented during the thirteenth century AD, at the court of Frederick II in Sicily. This court was a cultural centre from around 1220 to 1250, and it gave rise to the Sicilian school of poetry, the starting point of an Italian literary tradition. This school had some fifteen to twenty members, foremost amongst them the notary Giacomo da Lentini (sometimes spelled Lentino), who is generally credited with the invention of a poetic form that is now known as the sonnet. Ernest Wilkins succinctly sums up the argument:

> The sonnet […] is […] an artistic invention. The inventor was, in all probability, […] Giacomo da Lentino. There is no reason to think that sonnets were written by poets earlier than the Fredericians. The inventor of the sonnet was then, in all probability, a member of the Frederician group. Twenty-five of the thirty-one sonnets are attributed to Giacomo, and five of the remaining six appear in *tenzoni* [sonnet exchanges] in which he participated. He was the literary leader and by far the most prolific writer of the group. He was interested in metrical experiment […]. He was, moreover, a Sicilian, and the octave of the sonnet is derived from a popular Sicilian form. (1915, p. 108)

The sonnet as invented by Giacomo consisted of fourteen hendecasyllabic lines (i.e., lines of eleven syllables), subdivided into an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines), which in turn were often subdivided into two quatrains and two tercets. The octave used alternating rhyme, creating the pattern *ab-ab.abab*, the sestet introduced new rhymes and allowed for more variation, but the most frequent patterns were *cde.cde* or *cdc.dcd*.

From Sicily and the court of Frederick II the sonnet moved north to Tuscany, where Guittone d'Arezzo (c. 1235–1294) became foremost in taking up the new poetic form in mid-century. According to the analysis of Michael Spiller, he and his followers brought the sonnet "closer to the daily life of the piazza", using it to "speak of all the multifarious concerns of the citizens, from the bawdy of backstreet girls to the drums of war" (1992, p. 28). Not only did the sonnet grow in thematic scope, it also slightly changed its form: Guittone, who wrote some 250 sonnets, is credited with popularizing the rhyme pattern *abba.abba* for the octave, which was to become the dominant form in Italy and beyond.

In the last quarter of the thirteenth century, yet another group of poets, mostly based in or around Florence, adopted the sonnet, those of the *dolce stil novo*, the 'sweet new style'; the early Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), Guido Cavalcanti (1255–1300) and Cino da Pistoia (1270–1336) belonged to this school. As Spiller points out, with the *stilnovisti* the concept of the speaker of the poem and the Lady addressed in it, and their relationship, changed:

> The Lady of the *stilnovisti* is attenuated, and disappears into the mist of a symbol, into the undefined sweetness of a yearning towards the ideal. […] One might say that in her shimmering, airy lightness, almost she does not possess physical attributes; and these few (eyes, smile, gold of hair, her bearing) are spiritualised and reduced, till they become mere signs of a state of mind intoxicated by the ecstasy of contemplation. She does not, I say again, make up the Other in a dialogue of love: she is the figure into which flows and is reflected the interior life of the poet (Spiller 1992, p. 29)[1]

For example, we can see this idealization of the Lady in Dante's *La vita nuova* (*The New Life*, 1294). *La vita nuova* is a small book of poetry – including twenty-five sonnets – and of prose commentary that integrates the poems into a narrative of Dante's love for Beatrice, whom he met when they were both children and who died in her mid-twenties. It is also in Dante's *La vita nuova* that the word *sonetto* is first used to designate the specific poetic form – there is no evidence that either Giacomo da Lentini or Guittone d'Arezzo used the word to refer to this particular type of poem. There is wide agreement that the word is derived from *suono* (sound), and the diminutive *–etto*, and hence that *sonetto* means 'little sound' (sometimes taken to mean 'little song'). This etymology has been taken by many critics to imply that the sonnet was initially closely related to music, and meant to be sung. However, Paul Oppenheimer (1982) argues convincingly that there is no evidence for this assumption and that no musical scores for sonnets have survived from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Whatever its connection to music, at this point in its history, late in the thirteenth century, the sonnet had become a popular vernacular poetic form in Italy. Ernest Wilkins points out that roughly one thousand sonnets written during the thirteenth century are extant (1915, p. 466), and according to Christopher Kleinhenz the sonnet "became the most popular metrical form in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" (2004, p. 1053).

Dante was certainly an important sonneteer and helped to increase the sonnet's reputation. However, it was not primarily Dante but another Italian poet

[1] This is Spiller's translation from Mario Marti, *Storio dello Stil Nuovo* (Lecce, 1972), p. 159 f.

who became instrumental for popularizing the sonnet, and more specifically, the sonnet sequence on the topic of an impossible love: Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374). Petrarch, as he is usually named in English, was a humanist, an intellectual with wide-ranging interests who wrote mainly in Latin. His reputation and the immense influence he exerted as a poet, however, rests primarily on a collection of lyrics in Italian, initially known by a Latin title, *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (poetic fragments in the vernacular). Today, the text is more widely known by two other titles: either *Canzoniere* (songbook), the title used in the first printed edition (1470), or *Rime sparse* (or simply *Rime*), since Petrarch refers to the collection of poems as "rime sparse" (scattered poems) in the first line of the first poem. It is a collection of 366 poems, including 317 sonnets, which was to become "the greatest single inspiration for the love-poetry of Renaissance Europe until well into the seventeenth century" (Spiller 1992, p. 45).

Most of the poems are concerned with the speaker's love for Laura. In a short obituary of Laura (not included in the *Canzoniere*), Petrarch provides the following information about her: "Laura, illustrious through her own virtues, and long famed through my verses, first appeared to my eyes in my youth, in the year of our Lord 1327, on the sixth day of April, in the church of St. Clare in Avignon, at matins" (Durling 1976, p. 5). Petrarch had started writing the poems soon after this meeting, and he continued adding to and editing the collection throughout his life. Numerous claims have been made as to the identity of Laura, but it remains unclear who she was or even if she really existed. If there was a 'real' Laura and Petrarch's remarks about her are to be believed, his love for her must have become doubly impossible while the collection was growing: according to a note by Petrarch, Laura was already married when he first met her (a fact not explicitly mentioned in the poems), and she died of the plague in 1348 (the date is mentioned in *Rime* 336).

The collection is subdivided into two parts, 1–263 and 264–366, often called *In vita di Laura* and *In morte di Laura* respectively, as they deal with the time before and after the death of the Lady, but the titles were not originated by Petrarch. Giuseppe Mazzotta suggests that the day on which Petrarch claimed to have fallen in love, a Good Friday, juxtaposes Christ's passion and Petrarch's very different passion for Laura and hence "imparts to the narrative the quality of a moral quest from sin to redemption"; however, he also points to the circularity of the arrangement of the poems which "means that the ascensional movement of the narrative – the journey of the mind in love from Laura to God – is flanked by a countermovement that complicates the idea that Petrarch was engaged in a clear spiritual quest" (Marrone 2007, p. 1411).

This is not the place to discuss the possible meanings of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. What is important in our present context is its popularity during Petrarch's lifetime and over the next centuries. More than one hundred manuscripts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries include the *Canzoniere*, it was printed as early as 1470,[2] and at least twenty-five printed editions appeared before 1500 (cf. Wilkins 1943, p. 225); during the sixteenth century, at least another 130 editions of the *Canzoniere* were published in Italy (cf. Wilkins 1950, p. 331). Petrarch's reputation saw an additional boost when Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), a humanist, grammarian, and poet, singled out Petrarch's *Canzoniere* as the model to be imitated in Italian poetry in his highly influential treatise *Prose della volgar lingua* (*Prose on Vernacular Eloquence*, 1525). Initially, Petrarch's fame was limited to Italy, but during the sixteenth century it started to spread throughout Europe, as poets in France, Spain, Portugal, and England started to translate his poetry and to imitate his style.

Petrarchism, meaning in a narrow sense the imitation of Petrarch's Italian poetry (rather than his much more extensive Latin poetry), became a pan-European fashion, not only with regard to sonnets. Typical features include the hyperbolic praise of the idealized Lady, often in the form of a beauty catalogue linking individual body parts to beautiful or precious objects (e.g., the eyes as stars, or the sun, or windows to the soul; hair as golden wires; lips as cherries or coral; etc.). Whilst the Lady is praised for her beauty and virtue, the male speaker is caught in a paradoxical double-bind: his unrequited love for the Lady causes him intense pain and suffering, but this becomes a desired state which he does not want to forgo. Extensive use of word play, particularly in the form of contradictory combinations (antithesis, paradox or oxymoron), and the use of elaborate and complex images or metaphors are also characteristic of Petrarchism.

The themes and motifs Petrarch uses in his poems are traditional (mainly based on Ovid and on the courtly love poetry of the Provençal troubadours). However, his treatment of these conventional elements of love poetry is "profoundly original", his "originality lies in the intensity with which he develops and explores them, in the rich, profoundly personal synthesis of divergent poetic traditions, in the idea of the collection itself" (Durling 1976, p. 9). As the sonnet travelled to other European countries and as numerous poets started to imitate Petrarch in countless sonnets, this originality turned into a literary fashion and quickly became conventional.

[2] In Germany, Johannes Gutenberg had set up the first European printing press with moveable metal type in the early 1450s; the technology first appeared in Italy in the mid-1460s.

1.2 Forms of the Sonnet

When Giacomo da Lentini invented the sonnet, he created a new poetic form. As we will see as we look at sonnets through the centuries, there has always been a certain readiness to experiment with this form, to try out variations. However, distinct structural patterns have developed which are reflected in their respective rhyme schemes, and I will use this section to distinguish two basic types known as the **Italian sonnet** and the **English sonnet** (also called the **Shakespearean sonnet**).

While the two basic patterns primarily affect the internal subdivision (on the level of syntax and semantics) and the rhyme scheme of the sonnet, there is comparatively little variation in terms of the metrical structure. As stated above, in Italian the typical sonnet line is the hendecasyllable, in French it is the Alexandrine (a line of twelve syllables, often with a caesura before the sixth syllable). In English poetry, iambic lines are by far the most common, and most sonnets in English use the iambic pentameter as their basic measure, i.e., a line of ten or eleven syllables in which five syllables are stressed, namely the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth syllable. Inversions are fairly common, though, particularly at the beginning of a line (i.e., the first syllable is stressed, followed by two unstressed syllables), but other metres are rare.

1.2.1 The Italian Sonnet

Although the rhyme scheme underwent certain changes, two basic principles of the Italian sonnet have remained stable over the centuries: its fourteen lines are divided into two parts, the octave and the sestet, and these units are clearly distinguished by different rhyme schemes. Furthermore, octave and sestet are usually further subdivided into two quatrains and two tercets. The octave uses only two sets of end rhymes (each rhyming sound repeated four times), and while initially the rhyme scheme was that of alternate rhyme, *abab.abab*, embracing rhymes, *abba.abba*, soon became dominant. Petrarch uses the latter form in 303 (more than 95 per cent) of the 317 sonnets in his *Canzoniere* (cf. Barber 1977, p. 140), and Petrarch's great popularity during the Renaissance certainly helped to establish this as *the* Italian format of the octave. The sestet introduces new sets of end rhymes and allows for more variation, as two or three rhyming sounds can be used, either in an alternating or in an interlaced pattern. In Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, the most common rhyme scheme in the sestets is *cde.cde* (used in 121 sonnets), followed by *cdc.dcd* (116 sonnets) and *cde.dce* (64 sonnets); the use of couplets in Petrarch's sestet is so rare that it is deemed illegitimate by many theorists of the sonnet.

Typically, there is a break or turn, called *volta*, between the octave and the sestet, which introduces a discernible semantic shift. Hence, the sonnet consists of two parts of almost but not quite equal length, clearly distinguished by the rhyme scheme, leading to a division or development on the level of content, and many critics see this as *the* defining principle of the sonnet. The dynamics of the two unequal parts has been compared to the expansion and contraction of a breathing organism, or to the ebb and flow of waves. While this may sound somewhat esoteric to contemporary ears, there is general agreement that the Italian sonnet lends itself to a fairly balanced presentation of ideas, or to the exposition of a theme in the octave which is then commented upon in the sestet. The following poem may serve as a good example of the Italian sonnet form in English:

I love thee, dear one, more than this can tell,	*a*
Or thou canst comprehend, who lov'st not me.	*b*
Thou canst not fathom half my misery,	*b*
Nor reach the bottom of my love's deep well.	*a*
Nor dost thou care to try it, for the knell	*a*
Of separation hath divided thee	*b*
From him who ne'er again that face may see,	*b*
Whose image in his heart must ever dwell.	*a*
Yet it is better so, for, wert thou mine,	*c*
No passionate embraces could suffice	*d*
To slake the ardour of my quenchless love,	*e*
Unless my essence were transfused with thine,	*c*
And both one being made, as Paradise	*d*
Beholds its happy angels do, above.	*e*

(Upward 1888, p. 2)

It is the second poem in Allen Upward's (1863–1926) thirty SONNETS TO ELLA – a collection in the Petrarchan mould, exploring the speaker's unrequited love for Ella. Fittingly, then, it employs the rhyme scheme most frequently used by Petrarch, *abba.abba.cde.cde*. The presentation on the page reinforces the distinction in octave and sestet, and suggests the subdivision into two quatrains and two tercets. In the octave, the speaker focuses on the fact that his[3] love for Ella is unrequited and will remain so, since they are

[3] In using the male pronoun, I do not want to suggest that the speaker should be equated with the author (see chapter 1.3). However, since a pronoun must be used, I will use male pronouns to refer to the speaker in poems written by men, and female pronouns to refer to the speaker in poems written by women, unless this contradicts information on the speaker provided by the poem itself.

separated. There is a slight shift between the quatrains, the first one emphasizing the greatness of the speaker's love, the second the fact of separation, but they clearly form a semantic unit. The *volta* is explicitly marked by the adversative conjunction "Yet" that starts the sestet and indicates a break or contradiction. In the sestet, the fact that the love is unrequited is paradoxically presented as positive, since no worldly passion could do justice to the purity of the speaker's love. Hence, Upward's poem is a typical Italian sonnet that utilizes the form to reinforce the semantic structure of the text, which presents a situation in the octave and comments on it in the sestet.

The sonnet form that divides the fourteen lines into an octave (rhymed *abba.abba*) and a sestet (using a different rhyme scheme) is by far the most common throughout Europe and has been productive ever since the proliferation of the sonnet in the sixteenth century. However, some critics further distinguish between Italian and French sonnets, as the French sonneteers developed a different rhyme scheme for the sestet. Petrarch hardly ever used an arrangement that results in one or more couplets in the sestet (*cdc.cdc* is used twelve times, *cdd.dcc* only four times). When the sonnet was adopted by the poets of the French *Pléiade*, they introduced one or two couplets into the sestet. Pierre de Ronsard (1528–1585), the most renowned poet of the *Pléiade*, wrote almost 700 sonnets. His two most frequent rhyme schemes in the sestet are *ccd.eed* (405 cases) and *ccd.ede* (188 cases), establishing these forms of the sestet as the norm in French sonneteering. Walter Mönch, who provides these statistics, suggests that in terms of their respective musicality, this creates a harsh contrast between the French and the Italian sonnet (cf. 1955, p. 19). However, the rhyme pattern does not really support his claim that, due to the couplet, the French sestet is more likely to be epigrammatic, since it typically does not end in a concluding couplet – which arguably invites an epigrammatic turn or revelation at the end (see chapter 1.2.2). Rather, I would argue that the structural similarities outweigh the differences between the French and the Italian sonnet: both make use of an octave that is clearly identifiable as a unit and which is almost exclusively rhymed *abba.abba*; furthermore, both make use of a sestet that is differentiated from the octave by the introduction of new rhymes. Hence, both maintain the internal subdivision of eight and six lines that gives the sonnet its affinity to binary or dialectic representation.

1.2.2 The English or Shakespearean Sonnet

While the French and the Italian sonnets share many structural similarities, the English or Shakespearean sonnet uses an arrangement of the fourteen lines which is distinctly different, and which often changes the internal structure of

the sonnet. It is a form that is primarily used by sonneteers writing in English, and while William Shakespeare did not invent the form, he used it in most of his sonnets. Therefore, this particular form of the sonnet was labelled the Shakespearean sonnet (or simply Shakespeare sonnet), presumably in an attempt to legitimize the form with the help of his reputation. I will say more about the circumstances that led to the development of this pattern in the next chapter; here, I want to focus on the form and its structural implications.

Whereas the Italian sonnet is made up of an octave and a sestet, the English sonnet consists of three quatrains, each using a new set of alternating rhymes, and a concluding couplet, creating the rhyme pattern *abab.cdcd.efef.gg*. This arrangement does not necessarily preclude the internal division into octave and sestet, but it certainly does not call for it. Instead, the three quatrains facilitate the development of a thought or argument in three distinct steps, leading to an epigrammatic conclusion in the final rhymed couplet, as in the following example, Shakespeare's sonnet 60:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,	*a*
So do our minutes hasten to their end,	*b*
Each changing place with that which goes before,	*a*
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.	*b*
Nativity, once in the main of light,	*c*
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,	*d*
Crookèd eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,	*c*
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.	*d*
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,	*e*
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,	*f*
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,	*e*
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.	*f*
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,	*g*
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.	*g*

(Shakespeare 2007, p. 231)

The internal subdivision of this sonnet is ideally represented by the rhyme scheme and the syntactical structure: the quatrains are three syntactical units, each ending in a full stop. They are thematically linked, but each provides a variation on the theme of time and its relationship to human life. In the first quatrain, the passing of time is described as an eternal process and its lethal implication for humans is only vaguely hinted at. The second quatrain makes these implications more explicit: time eventually 'crowns' the new-born child with maturity, but the further passage of time turns this gift of maturing into the curse of decay. This idea is then further developed in the third quatrain:

the beauty of youth is pierced by time, which leads to beauty being marred by the wrinkles of old age. At the end of the third quatrain, the implication of mortality is made explicit: everything in nature must eventually succumb to the "scythe" of death. There is no octave-sestet structure, no *volta* after the eighth line. Rather, the first twelve lines of the sonnet develop one central idea, the power of time over individual life and beauty, each quatrain expanding the argument, logically concluding in the image of death in the twelfth line. The next line starts with "And yet", a phrase frequently used in sonnets to signal a change – in Upward's sonnet discussed above, the traditional *volta* after the octave was marked by "Yet". In Shakespeare's sonnet, the concluding couplet introduces a new idea, a counter-argument: while the living beauty of the addressee may decay, the poetry created by the speaker will provide a monument that outlasts time. This epigrammatic conclusion is facilitated by the rhyme scheme ending in the couplet, and it is typical of English (or Shakespearean) sonnets.

However, not all Shakespearean sonnets are as clearly structured in line with the rhyme scheme. In Shakespeare's sonnets, the concluding couplet does not always form a syntactical unit and sometimes the internal structure is more akin to the division into octave and sestet. For example, sonnet 81 treats a very similar topic to sonnet 60, but the internal structure is quite different:

Or I shall live your epitaph to make, [*whether ... or*
Or you survive me when I in earth am rotten,
From hence your memory death cannot take,
Although in me each part will be forgotten.
Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
Though I (once gone) to all the world must die;
The earth can yield me but a common grave,
When you intombèd in men's eyes shall lie:
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,
And tongues to be your being shall rehearse,
When all the breathers of this world are dead;
You still shall live (such virtue hath my pen)
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.
(Shakespeare 2007, p. 273)

Here the first eight lines talk about the eventual death of both the speaker and his addressee, which will have different implications. The speaker insists that he will be forgotten, while the memory of the addressee will live on. The octave ends with the suggestion that the addressee will be "entombed in men's eyes", an image that may at first seem puzzling. However, the colon at the end

of the eighth line already indicates that the following lines will provide a solution to the riddle (if it is one). As in the previously discussed sonnet, the speaker's verse will provide a lasting monument, to be taken in by the eyes of future readers and to be given breath and hence life when the poem is recited or read out. While the last two lines can be read as a kind of epigrammatic summing up, the punctuation indicates that the last six lines form a unit. Thus, although the rhyme scheme suggests an internal structure that leads up to a surprising conclusion provided in the rhyming couplet, the presentation of the topic is in this case more in line with the Italian form of the sonnet.

This example shows that the rhyme scheme can only provide an indication of a sonnet's internal structure. However, the form of the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet lends itself to an epigrammatic ending in a way that the Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet does not, and since the English form was not particularly productive on the continent, it is responsible for a unique strain in English sonneteering.

There is a second type of sonnet practically unique to sonnets in the English language, the **Spenserian sonnet**. It is the form Edmund Spenser used in his dedicatory sonnets to *The Faerie Queene* (1590) and in the sonnet sequence AMORETTI (1595, see chapter 2.2.3).[4] Like the Shakespearean sonnet, it is usually structured as three quatrains and a concluding couplet, but the quatrains are connected by an intricate rhyme scheme in which the second rhyme from one quatrain is used as the first rhyme in the next: *abab.bcbc.cdcd.ee*.

The Spenserian form did not prove particularly productive. One reason could be that it deviates from the Italian form without addressing the 'problem' of the scarcity of rhymes in the English language (as compared to Italian). In the Italian octave, each rhyme needs to appear four times; in the Shakespearean sonnet, every rhyme only appears twice, making the poet's task of fulfilling the demands of the form somewhat less difficult. However, Spenser's interlacing of the quatrains results in a pattern that also needs four occurrences of two

[4] The form of the Spenserian sonnet is reminiscent of the stanza Spenser developed for *The Faerie Queene*, a nine-line stanza rhyming *ababbcbcc*. There is some debate on who actually invented the form of the Spenserian sonnet, since it is also used by James VI of Scotland and a few other Scottish poets. Indeed, the publication of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590), the first instance in which his dedicatory sonnets appeared in print, is predated by James's *The Essayes of a Prentise, in the Divine Art of Poesie* (1584), which includes twenty 'Spenserian' sonnets by James and other writers. Despite this date, precedence as the inventor of the form is usually given to Spenser (mainly on the basis of artistic merit), but Murray Markland (1963) argues, on the basis of differences in style, content and structure, that it would seem most likely that Spenser and the Scottish poets arrived at the form independently of each other.

of the rhymes; only the distribution over the fourteen lines is different. Furthermore, the rhyme scheme of Spenser's sonnets runs counter to an internal division into octave and sestet, but neither does it strengthen a subdivision into three quatrains and a couplet, since the rhyme binds the quatrains together. Whatever the reasons, the Spenserian sonnet is a rare occurrence in English sonneteering.

1.2.3 Formal Variation and the Sonnet in English

As we have seen, English sonneteering is unique in having produced two distinct versions of the sonnet. The Italian and the Shakespearean sonnets are established and generally recognized models, the Spenserian pattern providing a more unusual third possibility. Particularly in comparison with the sonnets of the Romance languages, where the octave rhyming *abba.abba* holds almost exclusive sway, English sonnets show more formal variety. Nonetheless, the Italian sonnet is probably also the most frequent form in English language sonnets. In 1910, L. T. Weeks conducted a survey and statistical analysis of roughly six thousand sonnets from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. His method of selecting his corpus almost certainly gave precedence to 'established' authors and it cannot claim to be strictly representative of sonnet production in English. However, it is sufficiently large to warrant certain deductions. Of roughly 6300 sonnets, almost 3500 use the traditional octave rhyming *abba.abba* (55 per cent); in Weeks's sample, this is most frequently combined with sestets rhyming *cdc.dcd* (820) or *cde.cde* (775), i.e., more than 25 per cent of the sample follow exactly the most frequent patterns of Italian sonnets. By comparison, only 20 per cent of the sample follow the prototypical pattern of the Shakespearean sonnet (*abab.cdcd.efef.gg*). Hence, it seems fair to conclude that the 'English' sonnet is not the most frequent type of sonnet in English.

Throughout the centuries, poets have experimented with the form, creating subcategories of the sonnet. There are three aspects of the form that invite experimentation: the sonnet's length, the arrangement of quartets and tercets, and its rhyme scheme. Most deviations from the fourteen-line rule expand the sonnet. Thus, the **caudate sonnet** (or *sonetto caudato* in Italian) adds a 'tail' (Lat. *cauda*), usually of one or more units of a half-line followed by a couplet; in the **rinterzato sonnet** (layered sonnet), seven or eight shorter lines are integrated into the sonnet structure, leading to twenty-one or twenty-two lines; the **double sonnet** consists of twenty-eight lines, usually doubling the octave and sestet to sixteen and twelve lines respectively. The **curtal sonnet** is shortened to a sestet and a section of four and a half lines, thereby maintaining the proportion of octave to sestet (8:6 = 6:4,5).

If a sonnet has two quatrains and two tercets as its basic units, then these can be arranged differently from the octave-sestet division: In a **reversed sonnet** (also called *sonettessa*) the sestet precedes the octave, in an **alternating sonnet** the quatrains and tercets alternate, and in an **enclosed sonnet** the sestet is preceded and followed by a quatrain.

Not surprisingly, most variation exists on the level of the rhyme scheme. If the 'rules' of the prototypical Italian, French or English sonnets are ignored, fourteen lines allow for a considerable number of patterns. In the study referred to above, Weeks (who treated all sonnets as consisting of an octave and a sestet, regardless of their actual structure) found examples of thirty-five different patterns in the octave and twenty-nine different patterns in the sestet, leading to a total of 262 different combinations (in his sample not every octave pattern is combined with every sestet pattern). Some combinations are very rare, and certainly they do not all warrant a specific name. However, some forms stand out: The **terza rima sonnet** uses the interlaced rhyme scheme of the *terza rima*, ideally returning to the first rhyme (*aba.bcb.cdc.dad.aa*). The term **continuous sonnet** is used for sonnets that employ only two rhyme sounds. In the extreme form of the **iterative sonnet** the rhyme word itself is repeated, thus creating identical rhymes (also called tautological rhymes) in which each line ends on the same word. In a **chained sonnet** each new line starts by repeating the last word of the previous line.

All these alterations and experiments point to the fact that poets have never adhered to the so-called rules of the sonnet as strictly as some critics would have liked them to. In this book, I am not particularly concerned with 'sonnet legislation'; my approach is descriptive rather than prescriptive and we will encounter various experiments with the form.

1.3 Who is the 'I' of the Sonnet?

In the last section of this chapter, I want to address an issue that is not only relevant in relation to sonnets, but concerns a more general question in reading poetry: Who is the speaker in a poem? Or, maybe more precisely: What is the relationship between the speaker of a poem and its author?

These are theoretical questions of a general nature, but they are particularly pertinent with regard to the sonnet, which has often been seen as being particularly sincere and personal – despite the fact that it is a very artistic form of poetry which places comparatively strong constraints on the freedom of the poet. Furthermore, especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its use was closely linked to the stylistic demands of Petrarchism. Hence, the sonnet tends to be overdetermined by formal expectations and cultural atti-

tudes, and both factors arguably stand in the way of using it as a medium for unmediated and sincere self-expression.

Equating the speaker of a poem with its author became commonplace during the Romantic period. In the preface to the third edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), William Wordsworth declared that poetry was "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" which had been "recollected in tranquillity" (p. L), thereby linking the creation of poetry to the personal experiences and the emotional response of the poet. Furthermore, Wordsworth distinguished between quasi-dramatic passages in poetry where the poet "speaks through the mouth of his characters" (p. XXXIX) and those passages where "the poet speaks to us in his own person and character" (p. XL).[5] By linking the creation of poetry to the poet's experience and emotion, and by suggesting that the poet can speak directly to us in his or her poetry, Wordsworth invites a biographical reading in which the poet's life may be used to elucidate the meaning of a poem (or vice versa). Wordsworth often tried to create the impression that he himself was the speaker in his poems, particularly when the title indicates the precise moment of composition, as in "Lines / Composed a Few Miles Above *Tintern Abbey*, on Revisiting the Banks of the *Wye* During a Tour. July 13, 1798", or "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802". In both cases, however, external evidence from William Wordsworth's notes and from his sister Dorothy's journal makes it clear that the poems were not indeed composed on exactly the spot or the date indicated. Thus, these titles deliberately invite a biographical reading, which would be at least partially misleading.

Wordsworth's own manipulation of his readers notwithstanding, he emphasized the close connection between poet and the lyrical I: in a sonnet usually referred to by the beginning of the first line, "Scorn not the sonnet", Wordsworth claimed that "With this key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart". And the biographical reading of Shakespeare's sonnets (and of those by other authors) has become very common since the nineteenth century; critics of the practice usually refer to it as the *biographical fallacy*. Equating the speaker of a poem with the poet him- or herself is indeed a fallacy. On a very fundamental level, the speaker of a poem cannot be identical with the poet, since the former is a construct, a necessary component of the text, while the latter is or was a real human being. Speaker and poet exist on different levels. More specifically, the speaker of a poem is a persona created by the poet and it functions as a kind of mask he or she wears in the poem. The text may invite its readers to

[5] The famous observation on the nature of poetry already appeared in the preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), but the distinction between the different 'voices' used by the poet was only added in the preface to the third edition (1802).

assume a close resemblance between the speaker and the poet, but it need not do so. Hence, it may be useful to think of the speaker of a poem as a construct whose nature is to be located on a scale that ranges from the invitation to assume speaker-poet identity to the explicit exclusion of speaker-poet identity. At one extreme of this scale, poems that present an emotional response to an incident or a situation invite the assumption that the poet is using them to speak directly to his or her readers. At the other end of the scale are poems where the speaker is expressly identified as a different person, as, for example, in dramatic monologues like Robert Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" or Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses", both of which identify the poem's speaker in the title.

To assume that a poem can only give voice to the true feelings of the poet would be an extremely limiting view of poetry, and it would utterly downplay the poet's creative power to make us believe in the emotions evoked by a poem, regardless of the creator's 'true' feelings in the matter. In the dedication to his sonnet sequence *Licia, or Poems of Love* (1593), Giles Fletcher (c. 1549–1611) shows how misleading it would be to assume that the poem reveals the poet's 'true self':

> Now in that I have written Love sonnets, if any man measure my affection by my style, let him say, I am in Love; […] yet take this by the way, though I am so liberal to grant thus much, a man may not be in love, and write of love, as well as of husbandry, and not go to plough: or of witches and be non: or of holiness and be flat profane. (Fletcher 1593, n.p.)

What Fletcher points to is the power of imagination that any writer of a creative text must have. Of course, this does not mean that poets cannot write from a very personal point of view, cannot try to give voice to their 'true' feelings at a specific point in time. But they do not have to. And while it is a truism that poetry will be influenced by the experiences of the poets, this does not imply that every poem should be directly linked to a specific aspect of a biography.

In reading and discussing the sonnets over the course of this book, I do not assume that they are 'keys' to unlock the heart of their respective authors. What an author 'truly' felt is, to my mind, beyond the scope of literary criticism or literary history. Rather, I am interested in how the poems allow us as readers to construct meaning, considering them as individual texts, as poems in a particular sequence (if applicable), and within the tradition of sonneteering.

2 The Early Modern Period

2.1 The Sonnet Comes to England

The history of the sonnet in English actually starts long before the early modern period, which in literary studies usually refers to the time between c. 1500 and c. 1700. Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400) was a contemporary of Petrarch (1304–1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) and may have met either or both of them when the English king Edward III sent him on a mission to Italy in 1372. Whether or not a meeting took place cannot be ascertained, but the work of Petrarch, Boccaccio and also of Dante (who, of course, had died before Chaucer was born) certainly influenced Chaucer's own writing. Thus, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, a narrative poem of some 8000 lines, was clearly inspired by Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, which tells the same basic story of love between Troilus and Criseyde, her act of betrayal (in severe circumstances), and the death of Troilus in battle.

Troilus and Criseyde is generally taken to be Chaucer's finest achievement. In our present context it is important because it includes a song sung by Troilus (book 1, lines 400 to 420) which is a translation of Petrarch's *Rime* 132, "S'amor non è, che dunque è quell ch'io sento".[6] However, since Chaucer's poem is written in rhyme royal (a stanza of seven decasyllabic lines with the rhyme scheme *ababbcc*), he does not use the form of the sonnet. And while Chaucer might conceivably have translated the fourteen lines of the sonnet into two stanzas of rhyme royal, he expands the song to three stanzas, devoting one stanza to each of the quatrains and the final stanza to the sestet. Chaucer may have been aware of the sonnet's defining features, but he certainly did not feel compelled to maintain its precise architecture, which would not have suited the overall design of his narrative poem. I take this as an indication that Chaucer used Petrarch's sonnet primarily as a source for the paradoxical combination of pleasure and pain Troilus feels when he becomes aware of his love for Criseyde, but that he did not feel particularly interested in the specific form of the sonnet. In any case, there is no evidence that Chaucer wrote 'proper' sonnets and hence his translation of Petrarch cannot be taken as the starting point for English sonneteering. This is located 150 years later,

[6] It is unclear how and in what context Chaucer encountered Petrarch's poem. Hence, he may not have known that the sonnet was by Petrarch, or that it was part of the *Canzoniere*.

when the first actual sonnets were written in English. The two names connected with this are Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (c. 1517–1547).

The first book of *The Arte of English Poesie* (published anonymously in 1589 and attributed to George Puttenham) provides a history of poetry and gives the following account of developments during the reign of Henry VIII (1509 to 1547):

> In the latter end of the same king's reign sprang up a new company of courtly makers [poets], of whom Sir *Thomas Wyatt* the elder and *Henry* [Howard], Earl of Surrey were the two chieftains, who having travelled into Italy, and there tasted the sweet and stately measures and style of the Italian Poesy […] polished our rude and homely manner of vulgar Poesy from [what] it had been before, and for that cause may justly be said [to be] the first reformers of our English metre and style. (Smith 1967, II, p. 62 f.)

Puttenham was not concerned with the introduction of the sonnet, but the quotation above gives a number of important pointers to the context in which the sonnet was brought to England. Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard were both "courtly makers", that is, they wrote poetry at and for the court since they were courtiers. The term courtier covers a wide range of meanings, but in a general sense a courtier is a person (often a nobleman) in regular attendance at the royal court who serves his king (or queen) in various ways. Courtiers were vying for offices and the attention of the monarch, and since they were comparatively close to the centre of political power they could also act as intermediaries for individuals and their suits. It was a precarious position that was frequently marked by rivalry and jealousy amongst the courtiers. The life of a courtier held great opportunities for monetary and social advancement if one pleased the king (Wyatt was knighted for his services), but also grave dangers if one incurred his displeasure (Wyatt was twice imprisoned in the Tower of London but escaped execution; the Earl of Surrey was not so lucky).

Significantly for our present context, the court was a cultural centre. A courtier's task was to please his monarch, and that included the ability to participate in witty and polished conversation. Poetry was part of the social practice at a court and a courtier could prove his intellect and his verbal skill by composing poetry, by 'ballet making', as the practice was usually called. Much of this poetry is marked by the conventions of social practices like the concept of courtly love, and might strike a modern reader as unimaginative. In a study published in 1959, Harold Mason declared that many of Wyatt's poems were "simply strung together from phrases into set forms" and he suggested that there was "not the slightest trace of poetic activity" in the verse of the courtly writers (p. 171). This is an extreme view that does not represent critical con-

sensus, but it highlights the fact that courtly poetry was conventional and mainly composed to serve a social function.

It is difficult to judge to what extent courtiers like Wyatt or the Earl of Surrey thought of themselves as creative artists, but there is clear evidence that Wyatt revised some of his poems included in the so-called Egerton Manuscript, indicating that he spent some care and attention on them. However, like other courtiers, Wyatt was not interested in publishing his verse. Arthur Marotti, who has done much work on early modern manuscript culture, claims that in

> the Tudor and early Stuart periods, lyric poetry was basically a genre for gentleman-amateurs who regarded their literary 'toys' as ephemeral works that were part of a social life that also included dancing, singing, gaming, and civilized conversation. Socially prominent courtiers […], like Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey […], essentially thought of poems as trifles to be transmitted in manuscript within a limited social world and not as literary monuments to be preserved in printed editions for posterity. (Marotti 1986, p. 3)

During the early modern period, verse, and especially the poetry of courtly love, was transmitted and collected (if it was collected at all) in manuscript, in the form of manuscript miscellanies or commonplace books. Such miscellanies are best imagined as private anthologies. They would typically include poems or excerpts from poems (and also prose texts) by various authors, often without reference to the author, collected and transcribed by various people over a prolonged period of time. The sonnets by Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey were preserved in this form, before the printing of Tottel's *Miscellany* made them available for a wider public (see below, chapter 2.1.3).

2.1.1 Sir Thomas Wyatt

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) was a typical courtier. His father, Sir Henry Wyatt, had already served Henry VII and retained his position when Henry VIII came to the throne. He apparently groomed his son for a career at court by giving him a thorough education: Thomas Wyatt read Latin well enough to be asked by Queen Catherine of Aragorn (first wife of King Henry VIII) to translate Petrarch's *De remediis utriusque fortunae* and he was able to speak French, Italian, and probably Spanish. He entered the court of Henry VIII in the early 1520s and despite some setbacks he prospered as a courtier: he held various offices and repeatedly served the king as ambassador. Thus, he was sent on a diplomatic mission to France in 1526, and on a mission to the papal court in Italy in 1527. It can only be surmised that he came into contact with the poetry of Petrarch and with Italian and French Petrarchism while on these missions. He certainly had a fairly intimate knowledge of the French and Italian literary scene, since critics have shown his indebtedness, besides to

Petrarch, to Luigi Alamanni (1495–1556), Pietro Aretino (1492–1556), Marcello Filosseno (1450–1520), Clément Marot (c. 1496–1544), Jacopo Sannazaro (1456–1530), and Serafino L'Aquilano (1466–1500).

Wyatt did not publish his poetry and only a limited number of his poems survive in his handwriting in the Egerton Manuscript; hence, there are some doubts concerning the extent of his oeuvre. However, sources agree that he wrote some thirty sonnets, and that these are in all likelihood the first sonnets written in English. Almost all of his sonnets treat the topic of love and are connected to the discourse of courtly love central to the Petrarchism in fashion at the time. Indeed, roughly half of Wyatt's sonnets are based on sonnets from Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, and a few have been linked to poems by Marot, Filosseno and Sannazaro, but for some no model has been identified. Thus, the sonnet entered English poetry by translation and imitation, and it entered in the form of the Italian sonnet, although with some alteration. In the octave, Wyatt usually follows Petrarch, using the rhyme scheme *abba.abba*. In the sestet, however, Wyatt departs from the Italian model; most of his sestets use the rhyme scheme *cdd.cee*. Hence, Wyatt introduced a rhymed couplet at the end, but since the syntax usually does not present the couplet as an independent unit, the tendency towards an epigrammatic ending is not particularly strong in his sonnets.

In the following, I want to look at two of his sonnets, the first clearly inspired by Petrarch, the second probably Wyatt's own invention. In Petrarch's *Rime* 190, "Una candida cerva sopra l'erba", the speaker has a vision of a white doe, which he follows for a while; he sees that the doe wears a collar inscribed 'Let no one touch me. It has pleased my Caesar to make me free' ("Nessun mi tocchi, libra farmi al mio Cesare parve"); the vision disappears when the speaker accidentally falls into the water (cf. Durling 1976, p. 336 f.). Obviously, this is a condensed version of Petrarch's sonnet, but it suffices to indicate that Wyatt did not so much translate as adapt Petrarch's text:

Whoso list to hunt: I know where is an hind. [*wants to*
But as for me, alas I may no more:
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore, [*labour*, *toil*
I am of them that farthest commeth behind.
Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore
Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,
Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind. [*because*
Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I may spend his time in vain,
And graven with diamonds in letters plain [*sculptured*

There is written her fair neck round about:
'*Noli me tangere*, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.'
(Wyatt 1975, p. 7)

What is in Petrarch a dreamlike vision that carries strong religious overtones (Caesar in Petrarch's poem is usually taken to stand for God) is turned into a much more concrete and aggressive image of a hunt. While the speaker in Petrarch's sonnet seems to be alone, Wyatt's speaker is not the only one chasing the hind. Indeed, the opening of the sonnet invites others to join the hunt, and the speaker realizes that he lags far behind and is not in a good position to catch the animal. Hence, at the end of the octave he reconfirms his intention to give up the chase. While the octave extends an invitation of sorts, the sestet makes it clear that the hunt is in vain since the hind is under the protection of Caesar. Wyatt's departure from Petrarch is significant. While Petrarch's doe is declared free by Caesar (often read as a suggestion that Laura will return to God after her earthly life), Wyatt emphasizes the idea that she belongs to Caesar. Furthermore, he expands the legendary inscription, *Noli me tangere, Caesaris sum*, which was allegedly still found on stags 100 years (some sources even claim 300 years) after the death of Caesar, with a line that casts the doe in a very different light than Petrarch's.

In both poems, the use of the animal is allegorical. In the context of the *Canzoniere* there can be little doubt that Petrarch's speaker has a vision of Laura, and the diamonds and topazes of the inscriptions are conventional symbols of steadfastness and chastity. Wyatt's sonnet is not part of a sequence and the text itself does not provide a clear indication of who might be referred to (or if there is a concrete referent at all). The imagery of the chase suggests an amorous pursuit and the diamonds, while indicating splendour, take on an additional meaning of hardness: hence, the poem can be read as the lover's complaint that his adored Lady does not return the affection. This complaint is, of course, conventional and part of the discourse of courtly love. But while the typical lover in the courtly tradition paradoxically derives pleasure from the pain of being rejected by a virtuous and chaste Lady, this speaker decides to give up the hunt. Furthermore, by presenting his courtship (or the attempt at seduction) as a hunt and the woman as a hunted animal, Wyatt's poem introduces an element of sexual aggression that is definitively absent from Petrarch's *Rime* 190. The final line suggests a 'wildness' of the Lady that belies Caesar's claim of possession and hints at promiscuity, arguably the parting shot of character assassination spoken by a spurned lover outrun and outranked in the chase.