

ENGLISH SONNETS

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English sonnets by A. T. Quiller-Couch

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ENGLISH SONNETS

EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES

BY

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INTRODUCTION

*"The Sonnet—both thing and name—comes to us from the Italian."*¹ Etymologically, sonnetto (from sonare, "to play upon an instrument") is a little poem with instrumental accompaniment: just as canzone is a poem intended to be sung merely, and ballata a poem accompanied with dancing.

But as a matter of fact the earliest sonnetti discoverable have a proper precision of form to which the ballad and song have never yet attained, and, most likely, never will attain. We cannot trace them back beyond the thirteenth century: but the sonnets of Lodovico della Vernaccia, Pier delle Vigne, Guido Guinicelli,

¹ Mark Pattison. Introduction to the Sonnets of John Milton.

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Jacopo da Lentino, Guittone d'Arezzo and others,¹ mostly dating between 1200 and 1250, scarcely differ in structure from the sonnet which Petrarch practised and handed down as a model to the present day. We will discuss the structure by and by.

Among these early Italians, Fra Guittone d'Arezzo—he was not a monk, but wore the prefix as a member of the half-religious, half-military order of Cavalieri di Santa Maria—seems somehow to have walked off with the credit of having perfected the sonnet as an instrument: inasmuch that Mr. Capel Lofft, who edited an anthology of sonnets early in the present century,² salutes him as the Columbus of poetic literature. With what justice we are asked to prefer him above his brethren does not quite appear. But it seems certain that he enjoyed a great reputation in his own day, and by it gave a certain cachet to the sonnet-form which he approved and employed. Dante himself (1265—1321), who considered Fra Guittone an over-estimated person, uses the word "sonnet" of

¹ The English reader will find some account of these early Italian singers, with illustrative translations of their work, in D. G. Rossetti's *Dante and his Circle*. Part II. Poets chiefly before Dante.

² Capel Lofft, *Lovers* 1813-14.

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two forms of composition only ; and one of these, and by far the more usual, is Guittone's form ; the other being an arrangement of two sestets followed by two quatrains—with which we need not trouble ourselves. Guittone's form was finally lifted and sealed supreme by Petrarch's adoption (1304—1374), and as the Petrarchan we may henceforth speak of it.

The Petrarchan sonnet, then, has a matter and form of its own. In substance it is a reflective poem on love, or at least in some mood of love. It has a unity of its own, and must be the expression of a single thought or feeling. In structure it obeys the following rules :

- 1. It consists of fourteen lines ; each line having five beats or musical stresses.*

- 2. The lines must rhyme : and in the disposition of its rhymes the sonnet divides into two systems, the first eight lines forming the major system, and the remaining six the minor.*

The major system of eight lines, or two quatrains, is called the octave ; the minor system of six lines, or two tercets, is called the sestet.

- 3. The octave must contain two rhyme-sounds only : and although in some Petrarchan sonnets*