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Major Writers of the Sixteenth Century
English Sonnet
Bachelor’s Diploma Thesis

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2008
I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Author’s signature
I would like to thank my supervisor Mgr. Pavel Drábek, Ph.D. for his kind and valuable help and advice.
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Introduction

The poetic form of the sonnet was one of the most commonly used by the English poets of the sixteenth century. Within this fairly fixed form a wide discursive variability is to be found. It ranges from the conventional Petrarchan discourse of unrequited love, worship and disillusion to the political, religious and cultural discourses determined by the milieu of the Elizabethan Court. Shakespeare’s sonnets add to the set of conventional discourses (transience and mutability of beauty, temporality, lovers’ separation, immortality) an innovative one of homoeroticism. The sixteenth century sonnet literature comprised a vast number of sonnet collections and sonnet sequences in which a variety of discourses were accommodated. The topic of this thesis is the identification and analysis of these in the major sonnet collections and sequences of the century. The English poets of the 16th century found themselves in an unprecedented situation: their ambition was to create a national literature, “to make English poetry rival the poetry of Italy” (Buxton, 7) and “their patriotic ambition made them seek a European fame for English poetry” (Buxton, 12), yet there was no continuing English tradition of poetry they could follow (Buxton, 8). In its place there were the foreign literatures of France and Italy, at the time both strongly imbued with the Petrarchan influence. The English poets of the 16th century could thus undertake their self-imposed task either by starting from scratch or by tentatively adopting and reworking the foreign influences. For this reason the way in which the English sonneteers of the 16th century took up their stance towards the Petrarchan tradition, the way in which they sometimes adopted it, sometimes moved away from it, shall be of concern throughout most of the present thesis.

The first two chapters deal with the development of the sonnet prior to the first English sonneteers of the Tudor era, sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard the earl of Surrey: the first chapter is concerned with the sonnet in context of the Italian literature and the second with Chaucer’s reworking of Petrarch’s sonnet in his Troilus and Criseyde which is relevant
not only for Chaucer’s authority with the poets of the 16th century but also, more specifically, as a possible influence on the structural changes Wyatt and Surrey made to the sonnet form of the Italian original, supplanting the Italian sonnet 2 + 1 division with that of 3 + 1 which became characteristic of the English sonnet.

The third chapter focuses on the sonnets of Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and tries to identify the major differences in the discursive content between Wyatt’s sonnets and Petrarch’s Rime.

Chapter 4 deals briefly with sonnet writing of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547), describes the structural changes he made to the sonnet form and assesses the importance Tottel’s Miscellany had on the subsequent generations of sonneteers.

The following chapter is devoted to the generation of writers who had Tottel’s Miscellany as their model and takes a closer look at the sonnets of George Gascoigne (1535-1577), identifying in them the discourses characteristic of publicly engaged poetry, namely the didactic and moral ones.

The sixth chapter analyzes the ways in which Philip Sidney’s (1554-1586) sonnet sequence Astrophel and Stella both negates and accepts the Petrarchan sonnet tradition and suggests what function the varying manners of sonnet writing Sidney employs are meant to serve. The chapter also gives a closer analysis of the political and public-versus-private discourses.

The seventh chapter is devoted to the Amoretti of Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), in particular to the ways in which the erotic discourse is conveyed in the sequence and in which this discourse is modified and eventually turned into the religious one.

In the last chapter I focus on the devotional character of some of the sonnets of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and on the way the language of patronage is combined in them with the language of love, the public discourse of praise with the private discourse of
love. Further on in the chapter the way Shakespeare treats the related themes of love, time and immortality is analyzed.
A Short History of the Sonnet in Italian Literature

As the sonnet made its entrance into the English literature by way of translations and adaptations of Italian models, it is worthwhile to provide a brief account of what the development of the sonnet in Italian literature was like. Thus it will become clear, which of the various phases of the Italian sonnet’s development the first English sonneteers drew their inspiration from.

The sonnet form came forth as an ingenious invention out of the refined literary scene of the Sicilian court of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1208-1250) by whose courtiers it had been molded and developed. Formally the sonnet was composed of two parts – an octave made up of two quatrains and a sestet made up of two tercets. Similarly to the form which came into being under the influence of the canzone i.e. a bipartite song form of Provencal troubadours, the subject matter came from the same source: in the sonnets of the Sicilian literati, of whom Giacomo da Lentino is assumed to be the first to use the sonnet form as well as the most prolific, the theme of courtly love was the prevailing one. Despite their reluctance to write on political or religious issues, writing sonnets was for the Sicilian dignitaries a matter of considerable public import: the difficulty of the form entailed that by mastering it the authors were giving the world a proof of their eloquence and rhetoric ability – much needed qualities in centers of political power (Hilský, 35). After the demise in 1250 of Frederick, the patron of the Sicilian School of poetry, sonnet writing was taken up and experimented with by the poets of the Tuscan School of poetry who, free from the confines of Frederick’s political censorship, expanded the sonnets’ use to political and religious issues. Within the Tuscan School of poetry the sonnet had become a literary form of civic and political engagement. Guittone d'Arezzo (1230 - 1294), the master of the civic sonnet, wrote sonnets in which he commented on the events on the political scene of a busy city-state (Hilský, 37). Another side to the Italian sonnet is represented by Cecco Angiolieri (1260 –
1312). With him the thematic scope of the Italian sonnet was extended to the spheres of the low city life, the life of pubs, gamblers and prostitutes. In Angiolieri’s humorous sonnets the first constant literary sonnet character makes appearance; it is the persona of the outspoken fishwife Becchina the quarrels with whom are the prevailing subject matter of Angiolieri’s sonnets (Hilský, 37).

In the second half of the 13th century the Italian sonnet takes a pronounced opposite turn, a turn to poetic spiritualization and sophistication within what became to be known as the sweet new style. In the works of the poets of the dolce stil nuovo (Dante Alighieri, Guido Cavalcanti) strong echoes of Neo-Platonic philosophy are present. Dante’s concept of love is based on the Neo-Platonic tenet that beauty (woman’s beauty included) is a physical realization of her inner form, the eternal soul created by God. The beauty, being perceived, gives rise to love that ennobles the lover, gives him moral perfection and leads him towards the source out of which beauty emanates – towards God. The same love conception is later on adopted by the renowned follower of the dolce stil nuovo poets Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) in his 365 sonnet sequence The Rime which of all Italian sonnet literature proved to have the biggest influence on the writers of the sixteenth century English sonnet. It was the concept of love which from the whole tradition of Italian sonnet found the most vigorous continuation in the English sonnet of the sixteenth century.
Chaucer’s reworking of Petrarch’s sonnet Petrarch’s sonnet no. 132

It was still within the early stages of what was to become Europe’s centuries-long predilection for the sonnets of Francesco Petrarca that this poetic form was first attempted by an English poet, namely Geoffrey Chaucer. Half-hearted as the attempt was, it nevertheless proved a pioneer undertaking which foreshadowed some of the future attributes the sonnet would later acquire on its way through the English literature. Just how much of Petrarch’s 365 sonnets sequence the Rime Chaucer knew and what his first-hand knowledge of it was are now questions unanswerable, but what is known for sure is that Chaucer in his courtly romance Troilus and Criseyde used Petrarch’s sonnet no. 132, implanting it into the poem as the love-sick Troilus’ speech in which he succumbs to love for Criseyde. Strictly speaking, Chaucer’s achievement is not a translation, let alone a close copy of the original sonnet, but rather a reconstruction, but such that “Chaucer really can have the credit, before the Tudor poets, for discovering the sonnet, for recognizing it as a special form with its own features” (Thomson, 159). The credit is due to Chaucer for, though expanding the fourteen lines of Petrarch’s sonnet to twenty-one, he succeeded in producing a structural equivalent of the original sonnet, by conveying each of the two original quatrains by a single rhyme royal stanza and attributing a third one to the original sestet. This symmetric solution meant a transition from the Italian two-part (octave - sestet) division towards the later four-part division of the English sonnet (three quatrains followed by a couplet). Furthermore, each of the three stanzas of Chaucer’s rehandling of the sonnet 132 is concluded with rhyming couplets, the last of which – self-contained and detached from the rest of the poem by a metaphor and a rhyme of its own – is a foretaste of what will become a characteristic feature of the English or Shakespearian sonnet.

Chaucer placed his adaptation of Petrarch’s sonnet in the first book of Troilus and Criseyde and made it to be a poem composed by the king of Troy Priamus’s son Troilus amidst his freshly awoken longings for the Trojan soothsayer Calchas’ daughter Cressida. In
the “*Canticus Troili*” the very nature of love is debated, its paradoxes conveyed through a number of oxymoronic expressions:

When every torment and adversitee  
That cometh of hym, may to me savory thinke;  
For ay thurst I, the more that ich it drinke.  
...  
O quike death, O swete harm so queynte,  
...  
For hete of cold, for cold of hete, I dye.  

(*Troilus and Criseyde*, 404-406; 411; 420)

The strength and might of love and the helplessness of one afflicted with the emotion are conveyed through the seafaring metaphor, which found a steady place in later lyric poetry, the image of a ship exposed to a heavy windstorm:

Thus possed to and fro,  
Al stereeles withinne boot am I  
Amydde the see, bitwixen wyndes two,  
That in contrarie stonned evere mo.  

(*Troilus and Criseyde*, 415-418)

After Chaucer no one is known to have stood up to the challenge of writing sonnets in English for about one hundred and forty years during which the situation in England did not allow for the spirit of Italian Renaissance to make a definite impact on the cultural life of the country. But with the troubled years of the Wars of the Roses over and the stability of the Tudor reign established in the late fifteenth century, England opened itself to the cultural influences from the Continent amongst which it was Renaissance Italy which set the tone. It comes therefore as little surprise that when the sonnet form entered the English poetry in earnest with sir Thomas Wyatt, the sonnets of Petrarch served yet again as a direct inspiration.
The Sonnets of Sir Thomas Wyatt

In this chapter I am going to focus on the way Wyatt handles the Petrarchan sonnet legacy both in terms of subject matter and of the imagery used. I am going to point out the main alternations and shifts of meaning in Wyatt’s sonnets as opposed to the Italian models and to show where Wyatt most characteristically departs from the conventional Petrarchan discourse of courtly love poetry.

Sir Thomas Wyatt, as an ambassador of Henry the VIII active in France, Spain and Italy, had had ample opportunity not only to get to know such various forms of Italian poetry as the sonnet, *strambotto* and epigram, but also to familiarize himself with the works of innumerable Italian imitators of Petrarch’s *Rime* as well as with a vast number of Petrarchan scholarly commentaries. Before I focus on where Wyatt’s sonnet most markedly differ from those of Petrarch, it is worthwhile to note where, in which aspects Wyatt remained faithful to them and which typical Petrarchan conventions he had handed down to another generation of English sonneteers, in particular to Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. The central Petrarchan concept of unrequited love remains, as do the two main characters of the sonnets: the figure of authority, be it the beloved lady herself or the personification of Love, and the figure of the poet who describes by various tropes and conceits his state of dependence on the figure of authority. A conceit is an extended metaphor, a figurative backbone of the sonnet. It is a fairly elaborate figurative device of a fanciful kind, often incorporating metaphor, simile, oxymoron or hyperbole. Its purpose is to surprise and to delight the reader by its wit and ingenuity. The pleasure the reader is intended to get is intellectual rather than sensuous (Cuddon, 177). One of the conventional Petrarchan conceits that Wyatt takes over is the image of the storm-stricken ship in the sonnet *My galley charged with forgetfulness*. A very common trope of Petrarchism is the use of oxymorons which is frequently employed in Wyatt’s sonnets, e. g. in the sonnet *I find no peace, and all my war is done*, in *Such vain
thought as wonted to mislead me and in the sonnet Avising the bright beams of those fair eyes.

The sonnets How oft have I, my dear and cruel foe and My heart I gave thee, not to do it pain exemplify the typical Petrarchan trope of exchange of hearts, later used by Shakespeare in his Sonnet 31. The treatment of love affair as a warfare in The long love that in my heart I harbour, dreams in which the image of the beloved appears to the sleeping poet, apostrophes of inanimate objects, comparisons of the beloved to the sun or stars, the use of allegory, the image of beams shooting from the loved one’s eyes in The lively sparks that issue from those eyes or Avising the bright beams of those fair eyes, all these Petrarchan commonplaces are frequent in Wyatt’s sonnets.

In relation to Italian originals, Wyatt’s approach, similar to Chaucer’s, was not one of commitment to meticulous fidelity but rather that of inspiration, loose imitation and adaptation. For what Wyatt does with Petrarch’s sonnets is to choose from them those of suitable motifs and to convert them to his own artistic purposes. So Petrarch’s sonnet no. 269 Rotta è l’alta colonna e ’l verde lauro written on the occasion of the loss of “double treasure” i.e. the death of Laura and the death of Petrarch’s patron Giovani Colonna three months later – served to Wyatt as an inspiration and as a source of some of the imagery he uses in his sonnet on the death of his benefactor Thomas Cromwell. The resulting impression of The pillar perish’d whereto I leant differs from that of the original in that Wyatt’s lament, being far more intimate and personal, lacks the universal purport of Petrarch’s sonnet 269. Wyatt takes over Petrarch’s image of the life-supporting column (the pun being lost on Cromwell), does away with Petrarch’s pun on laurel casting a shadow on his weary thoughts, replaces it with an expression of esteem for his patron and goes on to extol the value of the deceased man. In comparing the friend’s significance Wyatt does not take over Petrarch’s similes based on empire, gems and gold, but coins a fresh simile of his own likening what his deceased friend meant to him to the very bark and rind of all my joy (line 6).
The motif of fate’s inexorability is to be found in both sonnets, but where Petrarch meditates on fragility and inconstancy of human life, Wyatt’s attention is directed solely to his doleful self. Sorrow in Wyatt’s sonnet is greater and, being mixed up with self-hate, more aching than in Petrarch’s sonnet where sorrow is expressed by the images of wet eyes, sad soul and bowed head. Wyatt is more eloquent in expressing his personal anguish, his individual suffering from which death only is envisaged as a relief: *And I myself always to hate // Till dreadful death do ease my doleful state* (lines 13-14).

Compared with Petrarch’s sonnets, Wyatt’s adaptations are of a much worldlier, down-to-earth tone at times verging on cynicism. The difference can be seen in Wyatt’s rendering of Petrarch’s sonnet no. 190. The original has a dream-like, ethereal quality to it; the mythological image of a white hind with golden horns standing by two rivers has a mesmerizing effect. The sonnet is laden with spiritual symbolism. Yet none of this is retained by Wyatt who takes Petrarch’s notion of inaccessibility, innocence and purity of the ideal down by founding his adaptation on the central hunting metaphor and reworking the original into a sonnet of love-pursuit. The original religious content (God liberated Laura’s soul and it is now unattainable to the poet) is lost in Wyatt, supplanted by personal, autobiographical overtones: the candid hind of Patriarch’s sonnet becomes deceptive and wild, a coveted hunting trophy (possibly Wyatt’s allusion to Anne Boleyn), and her liberation by the heavenly Caesar (the God) is turned into marriage by the earthly Caesar (possibly Henry VIII). We see that where Petrarchism entails the transcendence to the realm of the ideal or beauty’s guidance to moral perfection, Wyatt turns his back on it, by no means rising himself above the narrowly personal level, but instead resting with his morose and disgruntled self. In his adaptation Wyatt goes so far as to distance himself significantly from the notion still included in Petrarch’s poetry, that is the concept of courtly love, the set of values created and adhered to by the troubadours of Provencal poetry in which man’s love for a woman assumes the form
of a humble servant’s service to his idolized mistress and the love-servant’s devout adoration of his lady is the ruling principle of the admirer’s conduct and a value in itself. In his sonnets Wyatt abandons the Neo-Platonic proposition, embodied in the poets of the Italian dolce stil novo and their follower Francesco Petrarca, that a noble woman’s beauty is an objectification of the absolute ideal of beauty the worship of which leads eventually to the worship of God. Wyatt’s attitude to this pillar of courtly lover’s moral code entailing moral self-improvement by readily suffering and perseverance is ultimately dismissive, for to treat the lover’s courtship to a woman with the hunting metaphor and to call his amorous endeavors “the vayne travaill” and “time spent in vain” is contrary to the very sentiment of courtly love. (Thomson, 197). Moreover, the beauty of donna Laura is the realization of the heavenly idea of beauty (see sonnet no. 159), while no such claim is made by Wyatt for the lady of his sonnets.

In fact it is rather telling of Wyatt’s artistic purposes that of all his sonnets based on Petrarch’s Rime only one is taken from the more spiritual In Morte part of the sequence. In that part, Petrarch undergoes a transformation through the realization that all of his donna Laura’s rejections and all those years of his disappointed longing had been a trial on his way to the only lasting bliss, that is to his salvation. One-time desperation and confusion are turned into happiness and equanimity, and donna Laura is ultimately extolled for her constancy. Sonnets no. 290 and 351 most tellingly encapsulate this change of heart. In Wyatt’s sonnets there is none of Petrarch’s transcendental spiritual overlap. Figuratively speaking, while Petrarch’s soul ascends heaven, Wyatt remains firmly on the ground, reaching none of Petrarch’s e ’l pentersi, e ’l conoscer chiaramente - remorse and clear knowledge (Sonnet 1). Instead, the sentiment of his sonnets does not go beyond the renouncement of love, in sonnet My heart I gave thee, not to do it pain, declaration of love’s futility, in sonnet Farewell, Love,
*and all thy laws forever* or, at the very best, composed resignation, in the sonnet *Divers doth use, as I have heard and know.*

Similarly, other features, typical of Petrarchan sonnet style, also failed to make their way into Wyatt’s choice of Petrarch’s sonnets for adaptation. Thus some of the hallmarks of Petrarch’s courtly love poetry had not become part of Wyatt’s sonnets’ diction: the descriptions of woman’s beauty (to be found in sonnets no. 215 or 248), descriptions of countryside sceneries 219, 192, 162 are not present in Wyatt’s sonnets. His mythological inventory is fairly poor, too. While the Greco-Roman mythology is a much drawn upon source of imagery in Petrarch’s sonnets with images of Amor, Narcissus, Jove, Fates, Aurora, Mars, Minerva, Narcis, Atlas appearing throughout the collection, Wyatt’s sonnets lack these multiple mythological resonances, only Love and Fortune make a few appearances and neither is ever strongly personified. The least vague concretization of love is *the ruler of May* in the sonnet *Ye that in love find luck.*

Hardly anyone’s public career of at least some importance could in the 16th century England remain uninfluenced by the power of the Court, “the dominant cultural apparatus which both makes possible and controls [a society’s] cultural practices, including poetry” (Waller, 103). The gravitation in Wyatt’s sonnets directly to his personal worldly experience, the emphasis in his sonnets on the anguish of the individual, which was a part of the 15th and 16th century’s general “increase of emphasis upon the human pain, the physical weakness“ (Bradbrook, 12), had brought with itself the introduction in his sonnets of a discourse alien to his Italian models, namely the political discourse, the discourse of the courtly milieu in which Wyatt’s sonnets were written, with the pressures, insecurities, and hopes it inspired. What we see in his rehandlings of Italian sonnets is their modification in accordance with Wyatt’s own personal circumstances. We must not forget that Wyatt was in the first place a publicly active figure, a diplomat, a politician vitally dependent on his sovereign’s favour, and only then an
occasional poet, writing for himself and a small circle of people close to him. It is needless to say that Wyatt’s primary position of a politician, in the language of the era a courtier, impacted on his other one of a poet and not vice versa. Pronounced political overtones therefore could not have failed to enter into his sonnet writing, mingling with the commonplace erotic discourse of the Petrarchan provenance. Or, put another way, the court environment out of which Wyatt’s sonnets arose makes it possible to see the lyrical subject’s frustrated amorous and career endeavors treated side by side in a single sonnet. And so the unfulfilled erotic expectations and the courtier’s anxieties are combined and such words as displeasure, mine ill, comfort, trust may relate both to the love-affair theme and to the falling in and out of the sovereign’s grace:

Love slayeth mine heart, while Fortune is depriver
of all my comfort; the foolish mind then
Burneth and plaineth, as one that very seldom
Liveth in rest. So still in displeasure
My pleasant days they fleet and pass;
And daily doth mine ill change to the worse.

(Of Love, Fortune, and the Lover’s Mind, 5-10)

The sonnet Of Change in Mind leaves the language of love aside and fully focuses on the description of the opportunistic utilitarian manners rife in the court, thus revealing the court’s value criteria: it is not wisdom that is required and held in high esteem at the court but suppleness and versatility:

Each man me telleth I change most my devise;
And on my faith, methink it good reason
To change purpose, like after the season.
For in each case to keep still one guise,
Is meet for them that would be taken wise;
And I am not of such manner condition;
But treated after a diverse fashion;
And thereupon my diverseness doth rise.

(Of Change in Mind, 1-8)

These are the first two quatrains of the sonnet. The third one and the final couplet make a turn in another direction. They articulate an opposite tone, the manners of temporizing mutability and inconstancy are confronted with the ideal of steadfastness and perseverance that are ascribed to the you of the sonnet. Not having one single referent, this you is ambiguous. Taken in its court context, you may refer (apart from the readers) to either some other courtiers, the poet’s mistress, or the person at the court’s very centre – the king. The addressee(s) in the third quatrain is (are) urged to retain their favour for the poet. With the mistress and the king in mind, the pledge of constancy contained in the final couplet may be read either as a love vow to the mistress or as an utterance akin to (at the time already obsolete) vassal’s oath of allegiance to his lord; the discourse of love and court politics mingle again:

But you, this diverseness that blamen most,
Change you no more, but still after one rate
Treat you me well, and keep you in that state;
And while with me doth dwell this wearied ghost,
    My word, nor I, shall not be variable,
    But always one; your own both firm and stable.

(Of Change in Mind, 9-14)

Related to the political discourse is the fact that, unlike Petrarch, Wyatt in his sonnets brings into discourse the clash of the private and the public, the conflict between the intimate personal life and that lived under the pressures of the outer world. The court milieu with its strict rules of social conduct requires those who pursue their careers in it to hide whatever unseemly feelings they may have and to keep up the appropriate appearances. Wyatt thus presents a court etiquette of dissimulation:
So chanced me, that every passion
The mind hideth by colour contrary,
With feigned visage, now sad, now merry;
Whereby if that I laugh at any season,

It is because I have none other way
To cloke my care, but under sport and play.

(Of Others’ Feigned Sorrow, and the Lover’s Feigned Mirth, 9-14)

Often we can see in Wyatt’s sonnets the language of the court penetrating the conventional love theme: the scene of a sleepless lover or of a lover visited by dreams belongs to the conventional one of the Petrarchan tradition, but Wyatt does not hesitate to treat this scene by the language of the court: waking out of a dream and the realization of its “ephemeralility” is conveyed in terms of falling out of (the dream’s) grace:

Unstable dream, according to the place,
Be steadfast once, or else at least be true:
By tasted sweetness make me not to rue
The sudden loss of thy false, feigned grace.

(Unstable dream, according to the place, 1 - 4)

Finally, to instance the mixing of the language of love with the language of politics, let us turn our attention again to Wyatt’s sonnet derived from Petrarch’s sonnet no. 190. It is a love poem, as well as a poem in which other social factors are at play, namely those of power distributions within the court. The speaker of the poem desists from pursuing his beloved lady and withdraws from the affair not because he had been refused, but because she is made a claim to by the Caesar whose power is decisive not only for the poet but for the other possible suitors as well. The sonnet articulates a warning to them about the result of the power negotiations between the courtier and his ruler:
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,
There is written her fair neck round about;
   Noli me tangere; for Caesars’s I am,

(Whoso list to hunt?, 9 - 13)

Love in this sonnet is not left to play its games undisturbed by the world around and it is not
the lover’s nor the loved one’s emotions that are decisive in the game. On the contrary, the
world of power politics steps in and imposes from outside its decisive say on the lovers’ affairs. The
interference from the outer world of political power is reflected in the way the sonnet unites the
language of power with the language of love.
Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey’s Rhyme Pattern and Tottel’s Miscellany

With the exception of the last two rhymed lines alien to the Italian sonnet form, Wyatt strove in his sonnet translations to preserve the rhyme-scheme of the Italian sonnet and for its sake he often sacrificed the poetic value of the original, translating for instance “Amor, che nel penser mio vive e regna” of Petrarch’s sonnet 140 as “The longe love that in my thought doeth harbour” or “Che bel fin fa chi ben amando more” from the self-same sonnet as “For good is the life, ending faithfully.” One generation after Wyatt, another courtier of the Tudor court, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, considered, so far as sonnet writing is concerned, to be Wyatt’s successor, abandoned the rhyme-scheme of the Italian sonnet and introduced, possibly influenced by Chaucer’s 3+1 reworking of Petrarch’s sonnet 132, a purely English innovation in the sonnet rhyme structure of three interwoven quatrains and a final couplet, increasing the number of rhymes needed from four to seven. This advance enabled him to render his translations with more flexibility and ease and, as a result, Surrey’s sonnets, compared with Wyatt’s, are more poetic, fluent and smooth sounding: Surrey translates the aforementioned lines as Love, that liveth and reigneth in my thought and Sweet is his death, that takes his end by love respectively. With Surrey’s alternation of the rhyme pattern is concomitant a profound change in the sonnet’s very nature: the Italian sonnet, with its abba abba cdc cdc rhyme scheme is divided into the octave which ideally states or introduces a general or abstract observation, and the sestet which ideally provides a concrete elaboration of the initial statements, whereas the Shakespearian sonnet of three quatrains and a couplet with its rhyme pattern of abab cdcd efef gg provided for a much greater variety of rhetorical progressions of which the variation, instancing or gradual development of an argument with the final couplet functioning either as the argument’s poignant summary or as its last minute paradoxical contradiction was the commonest.
Both Wyatt’s and Surrey’s sonnets had been published posthumously. The aristocratic sonneteers of the Henry VIII court would not bear the infamy of receiving money for their poems and would loathe to see their poetic works in the hands of the common populace of London, therefore, at the time of their origin, the sonnets and poems of Wyatt, Surrey and others were not meant for publication. Instead they circulated in a manuscript form amongst the court members, several note books from that age into which their owners entered miscellaneous favourite pieces of poetry are still extant. Probably one or more such note books served as the basis for the first regular printed edition of Wyatt’s and Surrey’s sonnets in *Songes and Sonettes, written by the ryght honorable Lorde Henry Haward late Earle of Surrey, and other*, commonly known as *Tottel’s Miscellany*. Published in 1557, it contained the sonnets and poems by Wyatt and Surrey as well as a number of pieces of poetry by unknown authors. Its importance lies not merely in the fact that it is the first anthology in English ever published, but having nine re-editions before the end of the 1580s it was “the gateway through which the courtly poetry of Henry VIII passed on to the Elizabethans” (Berdan, 343). In *Tottel’s Miscellany* Wyatt’s and Surrey’s sonnets carried onwards to the following generations of English sonneteers the legacy of the English adaptation of Petrarchism characterized by the omission of the transcendental and spiritual overtones in Petrarch’s love for his mistress and by the unity of the courtly love discourse and that of the mundane power politics.
The Posies of George Gascoigne

*Tottel’s Miscellany* became “the staple pattern of the Elizabethan sequence” (Fuller, 15), proving to be a model not only of the sonnet writers of the 1590s but also for the group of mid-Tudor sonneteers writing in the ensuing two decades after its publication. Barnabe Googe’s *Eclogs, Epytaphes and Sonnettes* and George Turberville’s *Epitaphes, Epigrams, Songs and Sonets*, published in 1563 and 1567 respectively, and *A Hudred Sundrie Flowers* by George Gascoigne, published in 1573 have all *Tottel’s Miscellany* as their immediate inspiration (Waller 81). The word *sonnet* in the middle years of the 16th century was used rather loosely, and the author or the publisher could choose whether by referring to a poem as a sonnet any form of shorter poetry was meant or indeed whether they meant the sonnet as the word is used now, which view is preferred by George Gascoigne in his *Certaine notes of Instruction*: “…then have you Sonnets, some thinke that all Poemes (being short) may be called Sonnets, as in deede it is a diminutive worde derived of Sonare, but yet I can beste allowe to call those Sonnets whiche are of fourteen lines, every line conteyning tenne syllables” (Gascoigne, 471).

It comes therefore as no surprise that Googe’s collection only contains four true sonnets and in that of Turberville there are none. True to his word, Gascoigne included eighteen sonnets in his *The Posies* (the revised edition of *A Hudred Sundrie Flowers*, published in 1576), two of which he used as a stanza form. In some of these he brought into discourse of the English sonnet the discourse of the didactic moral, sonnet thus became part of the poetry with a wider public engagement than the love sonnets from *Tottel’s Miscellany*.

The collection *The Posies* is divided into three parts, Flowers, Herbs and Weeds, each with a different design: “Flowers to comfort, Herbes to cure, and Weedes to be avoyded” (Gascoigne, 17). Sonnets are scattered in all three parts. Thematically they are very varied: interwoven amongst the prose narrative of *The Adventures of Master F.J.*, which is included
in the *Weeds* part, are sonnets of the typically Petrarchan provenance, with the usual enumeration of the mistress’s beauties, their comparison with precious stones, the allegorical figures of Love, Hope and Death employed to convey the lover’s distressed state. The jargon of love poetry could have hardly been more conventional:

The stately Dames of Rome, their Pearles did weare,  
About their neckes to beautifie their name:  
But she (whome I doe serve) hir pearles doth beare,  
Close in hir mouth, and smiling shewe, the same.  
No wonder then, though ev’ry word she speaks,  
A Jewell seeme in judgement of the wise,  
Since that hir sugred tongue the passage breakes,  
Betweene two rockes, bedeckt with pearles of price.  
Her hair of golde, hir front of Ivory,  
(A bloody heart within so white a breast)  
Her teeth of Pearle lippes Rubbie, christall eye,  
Needes must I honour hir above the rest:  
Since she is fourmed of none other moude,  
But Rubie, Christall, Ivory, Pearle, and Golde.  

(Gascoigne, 416)

In stark contrast to the Petrarchan convention of enumeration of the loved one’s beauties and to the typical note of the love torment over the lady’s beauties and her inaccessibility is the earthy and racy sonnet of *Frydayes Breakfast*, in which the sorrowful sighing lover turns a man of action and has his breakfast his way. One can easily understand why Gascoigne, bent in his later years as he was on presenting his youthful literary sins in a better light, included this sonnet among the “weeds to be avoided.”

I thought it meete, with hastie steppes to go  
Unto the lodge, wherin my Lady laye,  
To laugh for joye, or else to weepe for woe.  
And lo, my Lady of hir wonted grace,
First lent hir lippes to me (as for a kisse)
And after that hir bodye to embrace,
Wherein dame nature wrought nothing amisse.
What followed next, gesse you that know the trade,
For in this sort, my Frydaies feast I made.

(Gascoigne, 413)

The moralistic, educational character of Gascoigne’s sonnets is apparent the most in
the seven-piece sonnet sequence inserted in the Flowers part. The sequence forms a personal
confession of the blunders of the youth, and to exemplify the truth of the moralist saying
*Nimis cito, vix bene* is its chief objective. The sonnets tell of a youthful lad who has been
mesmerized by the glamorous world of the court and is seized with desire to be promoted into
the court which he sees as heaven. His craving is fulfilled and he wants more, but as a result
he falls in debt, and comes to the realization of the proverbial wisdom that *haste makes waste*.
Mingled with the moralizing tone is yet another new theme of sonnet writing, i. e. the
criticism and slighting of the manners in the court. The luring splendour of the court is
referred to as false and treacherous:

These and suche lyke were baytes that blazed still
Before myne eye to feede my greedy will.

*(Sonnet 1, 13-14)*

In the following sonnet the moral dangers of the life in court are exposed. The courtly milieu
with its vain delights incites pride and vanity, so that one becomes boastful, eager for more
and convinced of such morally unsound views as that *all was good that might be got in haste*
*(Sonnet 3, 13)*. The vices of rashness and impatience are castigated:

Not there contente with common dignitie,
My wandering eye in haste, (yea poste poste haste)
Behelde the blazing badge of braverie,
For wante wherof, I thought my selfe disgraste:
Then peevishe pride puffte up my swelling harte,
To further foorth so hotte an enterprise.
…Thus all was good that might be got in haste,
To pricke me up, and make me higher plaste.

*(Sonnet 3, 5-10; 13-14)*

Eventually, as the cost of living at court sets in, along with the doubting of the very values the poem-speaker has been in such hot pursuit of in the court, the disenchantment comes. It is followed by learning the lesson that rashness and craving for easy success do not pay off and that the ways of patience and moderation are more rewarding. The moral culminates in the final sonnet in which as the right example to follow is set the approach of *the simple snail* that leisurely ascends the castle’s walls while the corpse of a soldier who charged the battlements much too hastily lies aside. A final piece of warning against the dangers of extremes is given in the three concluding examples:

My haste mad wast, my brave and brainsicke barge,
Did float to fast, to catch a thing of nought:
With leasure, measure, meane, and many mo,
I mought have kept a chayre of quiet state

*(Sonnet 6, 3-6)*

…

For proof whereof, behold the simple snayle,
(Who sees the souldiers carcasse caste a waye,
With hotte assaultte the Castle to assayle,) By line and leysureclymes the loftye wall,
And winnes the turrets toppe more conningly,
Than doughtye Dick, who loste his life and all,
With hoystinh up his head to hastilye.
The swiftest bitte brings foorth the blyndest whelpes,
The hottest Fegers coldest crampes ensue,
The nakedst neede hathe over latest helpes.

*(Sonnet 7, 2-11)*
With their emphasis on the civic and moral virtues, these sonnets of Gascoigne’s were much in the service of the propagandists of Queen Elizabeth’s regime. The only gradually strengthening regime of a protestant Queen sitting on the shakiest throne in Europe (Waller, 80) could not have but welcome this publicly engaged poetry which castigated pride, vanity, laziness and desire for easy success and which was intent on changing the public affairs for the better, on bringing about a morally sound society of thrifty, hardworking subjects. Understandably, the moralistic strain was not restricted solely to sonnet writing, as it is to be found for instance in a popular collection of epic poetry, the numerous reprinted *The Mirror for Magistrates*, nor was it limited to the first two decades of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, as it found its continuation in the sonnets of Edmund Spenser.
Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*

After the pioneering experiments of Wyatt and Surrey and the subsequent 1560s and 1570s generation of Googe and Gascoigne solidifying the sonnet-writing legacy of *Tottel’s Miscellany*, and after Thomas Watson’s largely imitative *Hecatompthia, or Passionate Century of Love* (a sequence of eighteen-line sonnets, published in 1582, in which the author makes no secret of how little original and spontaneous his emotions are, providing references to the literary sources which had inspired him including Petrach, Ronsard, Ferrabosco and many others), in the 1590s the sonnet became a highly popular poetic form and the decade saw the sonnet writing appear in abundance. During the decade sonnet writing was very much in the literary vogue, with most of the mayor poets of the time releasing (or just writing as Shakespeare was) their sonnet sequences: 1590s saw the releases of seventeen sonnet sequences of authors such as Sidney, Daniel, Drayton, Barnfield, Barnes, Spenser and others. The collection which opened the floodgates was Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, which was written in the early 1580s and published in 1591, five years after Sidney’s death on the battlefield in Holland. As a collection which triggered off the sonnet mania of the 1590s and owing to the manifold discourses inherent in it, *Astrophel and Stella* deserves a closer examination.

Despite the fact that *Astrophel and Stella* had earned Sidney the nickname of “the English Petrarch”, it would be a mistake to view the sequence as an uninnovative imitation of Petrarch. In fact, an open polemic with the requisites of the Petrarchan sonnet convention is one of the main themes and character-creating devices in the sequence. The sequence opens with a sonnet amounting to a proclamation of independence of the conventional guidelines for writing love poetry; the poet-lover, having perused other poets’ works, found nothing congenial or satisfactory to his
purposes and is admonished by his Muse that the only source of true inspiration for him is to be found in his heart:

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite;
Fool, said my Muse to me, look in thy heart, and write.

*(Sonnet 1, 13-14)*

The interpretation here is twofold: the heart may be viewed either as the seat of one’s emotions or, in consistence with the imagination of courtly love poetry, it is the place where the image of the beloved lady is stored. The latter concept is also present in sonnets 4, 32 and 39. Either way, the sonnet’s message is an affirmation of an autonomous poetic voice, free from the imitation of authoritative models. The autonomy is reaffirmed in a number of subsequent sonnets: in breach with the traditional presentation of the falling-in-love scene, the poet-lover does not suddenly fall in love at the first sight after having his heart pierced by the Cupid’s arrow, but the enamorment, to which Petrarch devoted a whole sonnet and often recollected in his reminiscences, is in the *Sonnet 2* rather more prose-like and rendered in a fairly laconic sober fashion. The love-poet falls in love only gradually, almost against his will:

Not at the first sight, nor with a dribbed shot,
Love gave the wound, which, while I breathe, will bleed;
...
I saw, and liked; I liked, but loved not;
At length, to Love’s decrees I, forced, agreed,

*(Sonnet 2, 1-2; 5)*

The *Sonnet 3* develops the theme of the poetical method and inspiration, present in *Sonnet 1*. The poet-lover rejects a style which abounds in rhetorical flourish and spectacular ornamentation but is devoid of all emotional honesty. On the sonnets written in a style like that Sidney has made a comment in his *Defense of Poesie*: “…many of such writings as come
under the banner of irresistible love, if I were a mistress would never persuade me they were in love; so coldly they apply fiery speeches…” (Sidney, 52). Instead of that, the poet-lover espouses as his poetical method observation and imitation of nature:

Or else let them in statelier glory shine,
Ennobling new-found tropes with problems old;
Or with strange similies enrich each line,
Of herbs or beasts which Ind or Afric hold.
...
How then? Even thus, - in Stella’s face I read
What Love and Beauty be; then all my deed
But copying is, what, in her, Nature writes.

*(Sonnet 3, 5-8; 12-14)*

On the same theme of having Stella and his affections for her as his true inspiration are based a number of other sonnets, namely sonnets 6, 15, 28, 50, 74 and 90. In sonnets 6 and 15 the reservations towards the prevailing ways of writing love poetry are voiced more specifically. *Sonnet 15* is an open rebuke to Thomas Watson and other love poets writing in the Petrarchan tradition who adhere to the time-proven modes of writing love poetry and imitate the authoritative and renowned authors adding little or nothing of their own invention. The assertion that Stella alone is a strong enough inspiration again concludes the sonnet:

You that poor Petrarch’s long deceased woes
With new-born sighs and denizen’d wit do sing:
You take wrong ways; those far-set helps be such
As do bewray a want of invard touch.
...
Stell behold, and then begin to indite.

*(Sonnet 15, 7-10; 14)*
In the first quatrain of *Sonnet 6* is mocked the commonplace usage in love lyric of oxymorons involving the concepts of heaven and hell, *of living deaths, dear wounds, fair storms, and freezing fires* (line 4). The second quatrain ridicules the trite overuse of the mythological paraphernalia and the pastoral setting. The following lines drive at the love poetry typically brimful of tears, sighs, despair, pain and *a sweetest plaint* (line 9), a poetry akin to Wyatt’s sonnet *My galley charged with forgetfulness*. Balanced with all these courtly love requisites is the poet-lover’s plain statement in the final line of *that I do Stella love*. It is fair to say that the author does nowhere hold in any contempt the unimaginative poets who stick to and imitate the established conventional modes of Renaissance love poetry (afore-mentioned Watson for example), for imitation, in his case the alleged, contrived imitation of what Nature has written in Stella, is his creative principle as well, as the last two above quoted lines of *Sonnet 3* attest, as does the conclusion of *Sonnet 90*: For nothing from my wit or will doth flow, / Since all my words thy beauty doth indite / And Love doth hold my hand, and makes me write (*Sonnet 90*, 12-14).

With the genuinely felt inspiration goes hand in hand another anti-Petrarchan tendency, namely the professed simplicity of expression. In *Sonnet 74* the poet-lover calls himself a *poor layman* (line 4) dependent solely on his own devices: *I am no pick-purse of another’s wit* (line 8). Simplicity of expression is for the poet-lover and for his mistress far more persuasive than sophisticated allegories, eloquence and philosophy:

> When I say Stella, I do mean the same  
> Princess of beauty, for whose only sake  
> The reigns of Love I love…

> …  
> I beg no subject to use eloquence,  
> Nor in hid ways do guide philosophy;  
> Look at my hands for no such quintessence;

(*Sonnet 28, 5-7; 10-13*)
Another marked departure from the sonnet convention is the way the adored woman is treated in the sequence. Yes, in a large number of sonnets of *Astrophel and Stella* Stella is the typical passive, voiceless character, the one that poetry is written on, the immoveable image, the projection screen on which the poet-lover projects his emotions, and it is noteworthy how seldom is Stella referred to as a real, living human being as opposed to how frequently the poet-lover speaks about her image. Yet, in the *Third song* she is allowed to abandon the passive role, as she is granted a voice which, like that of Orpheus’, can move stones and trees. Moreover, in the dialogical *Eighth song* Stella is given a voice and granted a possibility to expose her point of view, a thing unimaginable in a conventional sonnet sequence in the Petrarchan tradition. *Astrophel and Stella* is thus outstanding in the way that it is not solely a single voice piece of writing.

If more may be said, I say
All my bliss on thee I lay;
If thou love, my love content thee,
For all love, all faith is meant thee.
Trust me, while I thee deny,
In myself the smart I try.
Tyrant Honour doth thus use thee,
Stella’s self might not refuse thee.

*(Eighth song, 89-96)*

The dramatic character of the sequence is further enhanced by built-in dialogues in the sonnets. Sonnets 34 and 74 are the best illustrations:

Guess we the cause? What, is it this: Fie, no.
Or so? Much less. How then? Sure thus it is,
My lips are sweet, inspired with Stella’s kiss.

*(Sonnet 74, 12-14)*
Yet *Astrophel and Stella* is not lacking in many traits typical of the purest Petrarchan tradition and those who claim that *Astrophel and Stella* is a Petrarchan sequence have a plausible case to defend. The negation of the Petrarchan convention is thus far from consistent and the poet-lover contradicts himself in many places. In sonnets 2, 12, 29, 36 and 40 the love-affair is spoken of in terms of sieges and conquests, warfare between two adversaries which is the common conceit of the Petrarchan style. *Sonnet 16* refutes the claim of *Sonnet 2* that Astrophel had not fallen in love at the first sight of Stella. *Sonnet 20* rests on the conventional conceit of Cupid’s arrow hitting the heart of the would-be lover, a very conceit spurned in *Sonnet 2*. Sonnets 32, 38, 39 and 98 deal with the conventional themes of sleep, dreams and sleeplessness. Allegory is spurned in *Sonnet 28*, yet it is used to a great extent throughout the collection and such profuse use of allegory and apostrophe as in sonnets 4, 11, 31, 39, 42, 52, 56, 65, 72, 81, 94, 95, 96 or 98 is also a trait typical of the conventional sonnet style. Despite the fact that inspiration from his only muse – Stella is professed in sonnets 3, 50 and 90 and that “*Muses scorn with vulgar brains to dwell*” (*Sonnet 74, 3*), *Sonnet 55* speaks in its first line of invocation of the Muses’ *holy aid* and the same sonnet (in the second line: *With choicest flowers my speech to engarland*) also challenges the simplicity of expression professed in sonnets 3, 28 or 74. Such rhetorically elaborate sonnets as the sonnets 60 and 70 definitely fall short of the proclaimed simplicity of speech. Furthermore, the mythological figures make frequent appearances throughout the collection, typically in sonnets 13, 14 and 17, even though their use in poetry has been looked down upon as a superfluous artificial embellishment in *Sonnet 6*. Elsewhere, as in *Sonnet 9*, the poet-lover, in spite of all the reservations made towards the much imitated Petrarchan style, employs the conventional sonnet pattern of enumerating the loved one’s individual charms and comparing them to precious stones, a pattern used for instance in the afore-mentioned sonnet of George Gascoine. In her article *The Unauthorized Orpheus of 'Astrophil and Stella'* Maria Teresa
Micaela Prendergast suggests that into Astrophel and Stella the current debate on what constitutes the right approach to fiction is projected. She holds the view that these inconsistencies and varying attitudes to Petrarchan convention within Astrophil and Stella are part of “a dramatic enactment of the popular Renaissance debates on the nature of fiction” (Prendergast, 28). She then goes on to argue that the characters of Astrophil and Stella “may also be read as quasi-allegorical figures that act out the psychomachia of Renaissance poetical theory - the struggle between the acknowledgement of conventional authority and the desire for an autonomous poetics” (Prendergast, 28). In my view, these inconsistencies within the sequence, the oscillations between employing the Petrarchan sonnet conventions and the poet-lover’s pronouncements of his resolve for originality and his independence of them bring into the sequence a sense of dramatic change, as they help to create and demonstrate the changing personality traits of the poet-lover. They are practical illustrations of his love-confused state. Inconsistency and contradictions are only to be expected of a passionate lover who, in his confused state of mind (attested also by the inner dialog of Sonnet 34 or the slip of the tongue in Sonnet 66), may be excused for not practicing as he preaches as well as his “own writings [for being] like bad servants” (Sonnet 21, 3).

Apart from the usual erotic discourse and from the poetic one (concern about the mode of literary expression which has just been discussed), another important trait which marks Astrophel and Stella as unique among the sonnet sequences of the 1590s is its political discourse, in particular the way it articulates the conflict of the public side of life versus the private one. The theme was a personal one to Sidney, as his “career was one of political disappointment and humiliation; he seems to have been increasingly torn between public duty and private desire” (Waller, 137). For Sidney, the ambitious promising courtier (“Youth, luck, and praise even fill’d my veins with pride” Sonnet 53, 4), the public is inextricably linked with the court. The court provided him, as all the other court poets, with his primary audience.
It was at the court that he aspired to become a man of importance. He is destined and obliged to become one by his birth and station, an obligation which he perceives as burdensome, a “friendly foe:”

…that to my birth I owe
Nobler desires, lest else that friendly foe,
Great expectation, wear a train of shame.

(Sonnet 21, 6-8)

Others, because of both sides I do take
My blood from them who did excel in this,
Think Nature me a man-at-arms did make.

(Sonnet 41, 9-11)

The court and its interests determine the expected sphere of interest of the poet-lover, they set the agenda for him as well as the questions he is supposed to know the answers to: Whether the Turkish new moon minded be / To fill her horns this year on Christian coast? / How Poles’ right king means without leave of host / To warm with ill-made fire cold Muscovy? / If the French can yet three parts in one agree? What now the Dutch in their full diets boast? (Sonnet 30, 1-6). It is the court milieu that the poet-lover gets the appreciation from: “Having this day my horse, my hand, my lace / Guided so well that I obtained the prize, / Both by the judgment of the English eyes / And of some sent from that sweet enemy France” (Sonnet 41, 1-4). It is the other courtiers who pass judgment on the poet-lover’s conduct and according to the expectations they have of him make various guesses about the causes of his pensive moods. Some “courious wits” (line 1) deem him to be an aspiring philosopher, others an ambitious statesman, while yet others, “harder judges” (line 9) suspect him of rather more self-serving motives. None of them thinks that the real cause might have anything to do with more personal matters:
Some, that know how my spring I did address,
Deem that my Muse some fruit of knowledge plies;
Others, because the prince my service tries,
Think that I think State errors to redress:
But harder judges judge ambition’s rage –
Scourge of itself, still climbing slippery place -

*(Sonnet 23, 5-10)*

But with the pressure to live up to the great expectations and to keep up the appropriate courtly appearances comes into conflict Astrophil’s love for Stella which is of an ambiguous character: it both inspires Astrophil and degrades him, as it gives rise to desire, which, meant “in an emphatically sexual sense” (Marotti, 404) and directed towards another man’s woman, clashes with Astrophil’s sense of virtue (*Sonnet 4*). Taken on its own, Astrophil’s love for Stella is an ennobling experience for him, for it directs his thoughts to Stella, the material incarnation of the platonic idea of Virtue: “Virtue of late, with virtuous care to stir / Love of herself, took Stella’s shape, that she, / To mortal eyes might sweetly shine in her” (*Sonnet 23, 5-10*). But beyond the imagination of the enclosed private space there comes into play the stark fact that love between Astrophil and Stella would be adulterous and is therefore refused by Stella on the grounds of honour. And so a conflict of the public and the intimate arises, a conflict which could be summed up in the dilemma “To lose his crown, rather than fail his love” (*Sonnet 75, 14*). Astrophil, “full of desire, empty of wit” (*Sonnet 82, 9*) finds that his hitherto held value scale is turned upside down and all his ambitions and aspirations vanish into thin air: “When Cupid, having me, his slave, descried.../ One hand forgot to rule, th’ other to fight, / Nor trumpet’s sound I heard, nor friendly cries” (*Sonnet 53, 5; 11-12*).

Astrophil’s renunciations of the public life vary in intensity: *Sonnet 64* is a vehement statement of Astrophil’s whole-hearted dedication to his passion and a complete renunciation of career ambitions and everything that might possibly pass for a virtuous life, a statement of sheer lack of interest in public affairs around him:
O give my passions leave to run their race;
Let Fortune lay on me her worst disgrace;
Let folk o’ercharged with brain against me cry;
Let clouds bedim my face, break in mine eye;
Let me no steps but of lost labour trace;
Let all the earth with scorn recount my case, -
But do not will me from my love to fly.
I do not envy Aristotle’s wit,
Nor do aspire to Caesar’s bleeding fame;
Nor ought do care though some above me sit;

(Sonnet 64, 2-11)

_Sonnet 51_ expresses a similar sentiment in a much milder way, it is a plea for peace and quiet, a private place, undisturbed by ambition-driven plotters and gossips, a plea to be left alone with Stella, far from the busy madding crowds of the court:

For me, - while you discourse of courtly tides,
Of cunning fishers in most troubled streams,
Of straying ways, when valiant Error guides, -
Meanwhile my heart confers with Stella’s beams,
And is even irk’d that so sweet comedy
By such unsuited speech should hinder’d be.

(Sonnet 51, 10-14)

The public versus the private conflict is also reflected in the shifts of setting, genre and poetic forms (Wynne-Davies, 19). The abandonment of the court environment takes place in a form of retreat to the idyllic pastoral scenes as well as in a form of substitution of the sophisticated sonnet form for the form of a plain speech in a simple song. The lovers leave the pompous and pretentious milieu of the court, because “for a possible consummation, in fictive and real worlds alike, seclusion was a necessity” (Wynne-Davies, 19). In the country, both lovers, withdrawn to the pastoral setting, discard the constraints of the court, the social pretences and
stylized patterns of behaviour the court milieu obliges them to observe and give free way to their true emotions: “Atrophel with Stella sweet / Did for mutual comfort meet; / Both within themselves oppressed / But each in the other blessed… Wept they had, alas, the while, / But now tears themselves did smile; / While their eyes by love directed, / Interchangeably reflected” (*Eighth Song*, 5-8; 13-16). The countryside setting of the *Eighth Song* is also the only setting in which Stella is allowed to speak her mind openly and reveal her reasons for refusing Astrofil: “If that any thought in me, / Can taste comfort but of thee, / Let me, fed with hellish anguish, / Joyless, hopeless, endless languish… Trust me, while I thee deny, / In myself the smart I try. / Tyrant Honour doth thus use thee, / Stella’s self might not refuse thee” (*Eighth Song*, 77-80; 89-96). With the freedom of the countryside is concomitant the freedom to shift poetic genres: with his public role of a courtier who is required to abide by the codes of courtly love (*Sonnet 54*) and to write sonnets the poet-lover sheds this prescribed appearance and, becoming a shepherd, sings simple songs and switches the genre for a pastoral: “Go my flock, go get you hence, / Seek a better place for feeding / Where you may have some defence / From the storms in my breast breeding, / And showers from mine eyes proceeding” (*Ninth Song*, 1-5).

In the original 1591 edition, the sequence ends with *Sonnet 108* in a tone of sorrow and despair. The poet-lover is left alone with his sorrowful self imprisoned in the old frustration and sadness, with no moral lesson learnt, no sign of transcendence to the realm of the metaphysical. Into some of the later editions sonnets 109 and 110 are incorporated. These two sonnets close the sequence in a very different conclusion, bringing it to an end of moralizing and Christian overtones which topple the Petrarchan / anti-Petrarchan balance decisively in favour of the former. In *Sonnet 109* it is the carnal desire that is banished, as it only wreaks “ruin”; seduction - the very objective all the preceding sonnets had been written to achieve, is dismissed as “worthless ware” and “vain things”, while “higher things” are
preferred instead. With Desire overthrown, the poet-lover (by now more a poet than a lover) subscribes to Virtue as the guiding principle of his life. While *Sonnet 109* banished Desire and espoused Virtue, in *Sonnet 110* (with biblical references to Matthew 6:20 in line 3, to John 1:9 in line 7 and to 1 John 4:8 and John 14:6 in the final line) it is Love itself that is banished and nothing less than Eternal Love that is espoused. Earthly love is limited, it is only bound to this life, it can only last “in this small course which birth draws out to death” (line 10) and brings nothing of permanent value: “Whatever fades, but fading pleasures brings” (line 10). In an ending of overtly spiritual discourse, the passing, imperfect love of the transient human life is confronted with and abandoned for the only perfect Love leading to Eternal Life:

> Then farewell, world; thy uttermost I see:  
> Eternal Love, maintain thy Life in me.  
> (Sonnet 110, 13-14)

Love in the final sonnets of *Astrophel and Stella* changes its object and therefore its very nature. The capricious and fugacious earthly love is superseded by the spiritual love for the Eternal. The thus far worldly sequence takes a sharp spiritual turn. This small portion of Sidney’s sonnets instances the spiritual, meditative discourse in the English sonnet, first introduced by the very first sonnet sequence in English – Anne Locke’s *A meditation of a penitent sinner* (1560).
Edmund Spenser’s *Amoretti*

To a far greater extent is the Christian discourse present in another important sonnet sequence of the 1590s, in Edmund Spenser’s *Amoretti*, where this discourse is interwoven with the love one which only rarely moves beyond the usual Petrarchan sentiment. Love in the *Amoretti* never assumes the form of a covetous carnal desire as it did in *Astrophil and Stella*. On the contrary, the poet makes it clear from the outset that he seeks a higher kind of love than is involved in a mere fleeting, albeit strong infatuation. The word “higher” is used advisedly, for the notion of highness, elevation and uplifting towards heaven is a key one in characterizing the kind of the poet’s love: it is a love in which earth is connected with heaven and in which the human love and the divine one meet in unity. In *Sonnet 3* is echoed the Platonic tenet that the idea of goodness and beauty gives rise in man to an affection which causes that he seeks nothing but what is good and beautiful: “The souerayne beauty which I doo admyre / … the light whereof hath kindled heavuenly fyre, / in my fraile spirit by her from basenesse rysed. / … base thing I can no more endure to view: / but looking still on her I stand amazed, / at wondrous sight of so celestial hew” (*Sonnet 3*, 1, 2-3, 6). In *Sonnet 6* the merely sensuous earthly love is looked down upon, not worthy of the lover or his loved one; the lover’s aspiration has a heaven-bound orientation, it strives to achieve an eternal unity: “such love not lyke to lusts of baser kynd, …makes his flames to heauen aspire, …to knit the knot, that euer shall remaine” (*Sonnet 6*, 3, 8, 14). Base frivolous love is renounced in favour of the sublime; the emphasis is on a love that is pure, chaste and spiritual. The mischievous Cupid is replaced by Angels, God’s messengers: “For in those loftie lookes is close implide, / scorn of base things, & sdeigne of foule dishonor” (*Sonnet 5*, 5-6). “Thruh your bright beams doth not ye blinded guest, / shoot out his darts to base affection wound: / but Angels come to lead fraile mindes to rest / in chast desires on heauenly beauty bound” (*Sonnet 8*, 5-8).
Such are the emotions and aspirations in the poet’s heart as they are revealed in the first nine sonnets of the sequence. They are followed by sonnets in which the character of his mistress, or rather the poet’s perception of it, is being conveyed. For she is portrayed, without the courtly trappings of *Astrophil and Stella*, in harsh terms of tyranny “See how the Tyrannesse doth joy to see / the huge massacres which her eyes do make” (*Sonnet 10*, 5,6), she is timidly approached either as a much-feared awesome deity, that must be appeased in religious worship (*Sonnet 22*), that puts heretics to fire (*Sonnet 48*) and to whom humble prayers for clemency are sent (*Sonnet 41*), as a dangerous beast of prey (*Sonnets 20 & 53*) or as a deadly enemy: “there no meanes for me to purchase peace, or make agreement with her thrilling eyes” (*Sonnet 36*). Elsewhere she assumes the traits of a blood-thirsty monster: “that she the better may in bloody bath, of such poor thralls her cruel hands embrew” (*Sonnet 31*, 11-12). Amongst the sonnets of pleas for mercy there are a couple of sonnets in which the loved one’s moral flaws come under censure. They are the moralist sonnets in the Gascoigne tradition, chastising such defects of human character as pride, haughtiness and vanity

> Ne none so rich or wise, so strong or fayre,  
> but fayleth trusting on his owne assurance:  
> and he that standeth on the hyghest stayre  
> fals lowest: for on earth nought hath endurance.  
> (*Sonnet 31*, 9-12)

and extolling commendable traits of purity and modesty as in *Sonnet 84*. With the moralist discourse in the *Amoretti* is closely related the period’s immense concern with time and mutability. While Spenser had dealt with the theme in depth in his *Cantos on Mutability*, in the *Amoretti* the theme appears only marginally, drawing on the book of Ecclesiastes: “her minde remembreth her mortalitie / what so is fayrest shall to earth returne” (*Sonnet 13*, 7,8).
“All flesh is frayle, and all her strength vnstayd, / like a vaine bubble blowen vp with ayre”
(Sonnet 58, 5-6).

When the religious discourse appears in the sequence, it modifies the convention of the usage of traditional conceits. Sonnet 63 employs the common sea-voyage conceit, but with a difference. Invariably, the image of a storm-driven ship had been used throughout the Renaissance love lyric symbolically to convey the perturbed state of the lover, “his weary woes and ruthless torment” (Sonnet 36), as Wyatt’s adaptation My galley charged with forgetfulness or Sonnet 34 in the Amoretti attest. In Sonnet 63 the erotic discourse is not carried through the whole sonnet, here the sea voyage on a stormy sea is not intended as the commonplace evocation of the vicissitudes of love but rather it is meant to stand for all the hardships, suffering, pain, and death in the toilsome human existence in general: “in dread of death and dangerous dismay” (Sonnet 63, 3). Human life is viewed in the Christian perspective of a pilgrimage with a safe haven at the end, the Promised Land: “I doe at length descry the happy shore / in which I hope ere long to arraye, / fayre soyle it seemes from far & fraught with store / of all that deare and daynty is alyve” (Sonnet 63, 5-8). Redemption from life’s suffering and afflictions comes in the form of salvation, the “eternall blisse” and “the jouyous safety of so sweet a rest” (Sonnet 63, 10).

The idea of salvation and eternal life is further developed in The Easter Sonnet 68 in which there are articulated some of the principle tenets of Christian faith such as Christ’s “triumph ouer death and sin” (line 2) or the redemptive character of his death which is the condition for salvation of humanity: “being with thy deare blood clene washt from sin, / may liue for euer in felicity” (Sonnet 68, 7-8). In Sonnet 68 the traditional amorous discourse is profoundly modified by the religious one: God sacrificed his son for love, Christ died for humankind for love, and this love of God shines through, percolates into and is an inspiration for the love between a man and a woman: “And that thy loue we weighing worthily, / may likewise loue
thee for the same againe: / and for thy sake that all lyke deare didst buy, / with loue may one another entertayne. / So let vs loue, deare loue, lyke as we ought, / loue is the lesson which the Lord vs taught” (Sonnet 68, 7-8). Living with such godly and God-inspired love, people are able “here on earth to haue such heuens blisse” (Sonnet 72, 14) and lead their lives in harmonious and faithful matrimony “exceeding sweet, yet voyd of sinfull vice” (Sonnet 77, 9).

Apart from the amorous and the religious discourse in the Amoretti there is a noticeable self-consciousness and awareness of its public courtly character. Writing poetry in the 1590s and sonnets in particular was a matter of prestige, it was one of the items in the arsenal of social and political means of enhancing one’s career prospects and advancement in the competitive environment of the court. Just as the Italian sonnet had in its history a phase when writing sonnets was a challenge by surmounting of which aspirants for public offices proved their worthiness and ability, writing sonnets in 1590s England was assumed to be the touchstone for eloquence and rhetoric ability and as such the capability was deemed to be amongst the essential attributes of a gentleman. A well written collection of sonnets put on display was an important part of the individual’s self-assertion, self-propagation and self-aggrandizement in the struggle for position and influence at the court. Edmund Spenser was one of the authors who believed that they could, figuratively speaking, write their way to influence and power. What was needed, they believed, was a literature that was either in full accordance with the ideological wishes of the court (moralist literature of the Gascoigne type) or a literature obligingly adulating and fawning upon the Queen. Thanks to the social realities in the 1590s England, sonnet was a most appropriate form for achieving this objective. The typical love sonnet situation – the unattainable superior lady courted for favours by her admiring servant, bore a striking resemblance to the existing situation in England with a Virgin Queen on the throne who “systematically encouraged her (male) courtiers to relate to
her in the role of Petrarchan lovers… Petrarchism became … part of public policy” (Waller, 80). A love sonnet written to a woman was therefore always, in a way, also written for the Queen, and thus involved a wider public significance. The public, power-oriented discourse in the Amoretti is exemplified by Sonnet 74, currying favour with the monarch “my souereigne Queene most kind” (line 7) who is eulogized amongst the three most important women of the poet’s life:

Ye three Elizabeths for euer liue,
that three such graces did vnto me giue.

(Sonnet 74, 13-14)

In Thomas Wyatt the love discourse is disrupted by the outer world of power: the king is a power from without which stops the free flow of love between the poet and his mistress and does away with his hopes that their love might reach fruition. Thus the political disrupts the erotic. Here, in Spenser’s Amoretti, the love discourse is not marred by any such outer interference. On the contrary, the queen is treated as a positive figure of political authority, completing the harmonious trio of the poet’s three most beloved women. The erotic and the political are in harmony.
The Sonnets of William Shakespeare

Much more than in the Amoretti is the thematic discourse of patronage present in The Sonnets of William Shakespeare some of which have an intrinsically devotional character. The institution of patronage was widespread in Elizabethan England and it was to a considerable extent contributive to the rise of the English Renaissance. For aristocratic families patronage was more often than not a matter of prestige, so much so that it was often felt as “a glory hereditary to their house” (Buxton, 31). The contract between the poet and the patron was beneficial to both parties: for the poet the patronage secured the commissioning of particular works, the assurance that the works commissioned are produced on demand of a known taste, the facilitation of the relation between the poet and his audience, “lively and stimulating criticism of the poet by the patron” (Buxton, vii), and, where necessary, the financial wherewithal (cf. Amoretti, Sonnet 74, 8). In return for providing these the patron had his or her desire for their memory to be carried on to future generations assuaged and “the poets were not slow to take advantage of this vanity” (Buxton, 30). In Shakespeare’s Sonnets where the beloved fair youth is simultaneously the poet’s aristocratic patron, the language of patronage is combined with the language of love. The compliments of a lover are one with compliments of a vassal in patronage and the poet’s pleas for amorous favour are unrecognizable from those for favour from a patron: Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage / Thy merit hath my duty strongly knit, to thee I send this written embassage, / To witness duty, not to show my wit / …To show me worthy of thy sweet respect (Sonnet 26, 1-4, 12). The unity of the two roles – that of a patron and that of the admired youth, brings about the unity of two discourses – the public discourse of praise to which the poet is bound by a respectful obligation of a vassal and the private discourse of love to which the poet is bound by his emotions. The unity of praise, humble devotion and love shows itself most noticeably in Sonnet 38: How can my Muse want subject to invent, / While thou dost breathe, that pour’st
into my verse / Thine own sweet argument, too excellent / For every vulgar paper to rehearse? (Sonnet 38, 1-4). In the first seventeen sonnets of the sequence the poet pays his debt, his duty of a vassal with his concern for the preservation of the youth’s beauty, appeals to his “wisdom, beauty and increase” (Sonnet 11, 5) to discard his suicidal selfishness, self-love and “murderous hate” (Sonnet 10, 5) and to have children. The young aristocrat is reminded of his public responsibility not to live for himself but for the benefit of wider community: Seeking that beauteous roof to ruinate, / Which to repair should be thy chief desire (Sonnet 10, 7-8).

Who lets so fair a house fall to decay / Which husbandry in honour might uphold (Sonnet 13, 10-11). As early as in the initial procreation sonnets comes into discourse the theme of time and mortality. Having children is proposed not only as a means of passing the fair youth’s beauty on to future generations but also as a way the young aristocrat can triumph over death and in a way secure his immortality, see Sonnet 6, 12, 13 or 16:

Then what could death do if thou shouldst depart,
Leaving thee living in posterity?
(Sonnet 6, 11-12)

And nothing ‘gainst Time’s scythe can make deference
Save breed to brave him when he takes thee hence.
(Sonnet 12, 13-14)

Against the stormy gusts of winter’s day
And barren rage of death’s eternal cold.
(Sonnet 13, 11-12)

Apart from the exhortations to have progeny, another way the poet meets his vassal duty to his patron is by rendering his memory immortal through the power of poetic creation. Besides the speaker, the fair youth, dark lady and the rival poet, Time, against which the poet wages war with his verse, can almost be seen as the fifth character of the sequence which abounds in
images and metaphors conveying the relentless power of Time. In The Sonnets the period’s concern with time and mutability is tangible throughout. Time is depicted as the creator and destroyer of beauty (Sonnet 5), its unstoppable flow is likened to the regular and unavoidable decline of the sun (Sonnet 7) or the repeated beating of waves against the shore (Sonnet 60), in some sonnets the “interchange of state,” the inconstancy and mutability of all things is emphasized (Sonnet 15, 64, 115), while others foreground its connection with ageing and decay (Sonnet 12, 73). The effects of time are set in a variety of contexts; Sonnet 12 portrays the progress of time within a rural context of a countryside, the flow of time is articulated in terms of the rhythms of a country life, the chime of bells, trees shedding leaves and fields yielding yearly harvest. The passage of time is treated in terms of parts of day and year (Sonnet 7, 73), in terms of human life-span (Sonnet 63), and historical and geological epochs (Sonnet 64). The highest level of generalization is reached in Sonnet 65, in which over brass, stone, earth and sea “sad mortality” triumphs. From this most general, universal level the poet goes over to the most personal, intimate level, speaking of how the flow of time affects him and his love and what his own death would mean for their relationship, see Sonnets 71-74.

Against the backdrop of the Time theme Shakespeare develops the ancient theme of the belief in the power of poetry to undo the effects of time and attain immortality. Initially, the base-born poet’s vassal position to his aristocratic friend restricts his proclamations of the power of artistic creation to humble comparisons of art to grafting (Sonnet 15). Neither does Sonnet 17, which is also concerned with preserving one’s memory in poetry, show a great deal of confidence in the power of poetry; a sonnet is likened to a tomb that can hardly do justice to life, let alone grant immortality to it. But as the sequence progresses on, the poet seems to acquire more poetic self-confidence and he proclaims the power of art in a far more vociferous manner, yet still within the due respect and reverence of a vassal to his high-born patron which command him to exalt the patron and demean himself:
Or you survive 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 entombed in men’s eyes shall lie.

*(Sonnet 81, 2-8)*

It is after all in the services of the young aristocrat that the genius of the poet is employed and so in the sonnets to follow the self-confident poet sheds his undue humility and the poetry’s might to triumph over time and death is voiced with all the poetic flair and self-assurance. The wind has changed and now it is the conquered death that is subdued to poetry. The poet speaks as if he almost forgot about his patron he is supposed to eternalize and triumphantly declares his own immortality: My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes, / Since, spite of him, I’ll live in this poor rhyme *(Sonnet 107, 10-11).* The motif of the artistic creation resisting and prevailing over the destructive power of time is recurrent in sonnets 18, 55, 60, 63, 65, 81,100,101, 107 and it eventually culminates in Sonnet 123, in a grand, spectacular gesture of defiance and virtual negation of mutability and time:

No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change.
…This I do vow, and this shall ever be:
I will be true despite thy scythe and thee.

*(Sonnet 123, 1, 13-14)*

Apart from the themes of time and mutability and their negation through the power of literary creation to attain eternal memory, the other pivotal discourse of the sequence is the discourse of love. Just as the theme of time and immortality was treated from various viewpoints and in a variety of contexts, the sequence presents a whole spectrum of kinds of
love. This is one of the many innovative features of *The Sonnets*: whereas the previous Petrarchan sonnet sequences were concerned with two kinds of love at the most – with the poet’s fixed obsession with the image of his lady, the shifts of his emotion between joy and dismay on the one hand, and the love transmuted into its spiritual form on the other, *The Sonnets* presents a plethora of various aspects of love, some of which, needless to say, are worlds apart from the traditional Petrarchan sentiment. Shakespeare thus hugely broadens the usual limited scope of the traditional erotic discourse. His sonnet sequence exemplifies love in all its shapes and colours. There is the glorification of the mature, constant, faithful love in *Sonnet 116*. There is the spiritual love which amounts to a religious devotion to the beloved who is worshiped in an almost sacramental language, see Sonnets 112, 105 – 108: …but yet, like prayers divine, / I must each day say o’er the same, / Counting no old thing old – thou mine, I thine - / Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name (*Sonnet 108*, 5-8). Opposed to these is the carnal, lusty, inconstant and immature love of the Dark Lady sonnets (138, 139, 147, 151, and 152). There are the obscene and bawdy aspects of love in *Sonnets* 135, 136 and 151. From the pole of ennobling spiritual love in *Sonnet 108* Shakespeare reaches the other extreme, analyzing the extremities of our embarrassments, self-disgusts and anxieties related to love and sex in *Sonnet 129*. Both opposing kinds of love – the almost ideal one for the aristocratic friend and the all too earthly one for the perfidious Dark Lady, are only contained within one sonnet, the *Sonnet 144*. As if the spectrum were not colourful enough, *The Sonnets* include in their erotic discourse the homoerotic sentiment in *Sonnet 20*. None of the manifold forms of love is put above the rest, singled out as the one and only true and best. That would be contrary to the overall purport of the sequence which is to render love in all its variability, to offer no definition of love other than that it is only definable through its changes.

In comparison with the sonnets of Shakespeare’s predecessors and contemporaries dealt with in the present thesis, *The Sonnets* cannot fail to prove far more lifelike and
psychologically convincing. The reason is that Shakespeare’s predecessors deal with apostrophes of inanimate objects, prefabricated conceits, and general allegories which, meant to stand for, represent given emotions fall flat in creating a deeper impact on the reader. Instead of employing for example the usual sea-voyage conceit which almost automatically and invariably stands for the lover’s conflicting emotions, Shakespeare writes a sonnet which directly evokes the sense of conflict, confusion and paradox in the reader, he works them right into the fabric of the sonnet which thus conveys the state of confusion in a much more graphic and vivid way. Sonnet 34 is the poet’s rebuke to his friend for an unspecified disgrace. Then in Sonnet 35 the voice shifts abruptly from accusations of the friend to giving excuses of the friend’s trespass and finally turns against the poet himself in a series of self-accusations. Such abrupt shifts and contradictions are beyond comparison more convincing and effective than any lifeless image of a storm-tossed ship. Similarly, paradox and contradiction is worked directly into the very tissue of Sonnet 58 which, claiming that it does not accuse nor implores where and how the young friend spends his time, accuses and implores all the more. Where Shakespeare does take over the Petrarchan mode, he does so in a genuinely innovative way or in an approach of parody (see Sonnet 130). One of such modes was the accumulation of opposites and oxymorons in a sonnet, but whereas the invention of sonneteers in the Petrarchan tradition did not venture beyond the terms of joy and sadness, ice and fire or life and death, Shakespeare’s method in Sonnet 75 of accumulating paradox upon paradox is much more refined and sophisticated, and as a result it conveys the complexities of love in a far more lifelike and convincing manner:

Now counting best to be with you alone,
Then bettered that the world may see my pleasure;
Sometime all full with feasting on your sight,
And by and by clean starved for a look;

(Sonnet 75, 7-10)
Shakespeare’s poetry in *The Sonnets* thus forms a break and a huge step forward from the preceding and in the 1590s still prevailing Sidney-Spenser sonnet tradition characterized by frequent use of generalizing allegory, formal antitheses and verbal and acoustic harmony (Stříbrný, 188). Shakespeare’s poetic voice is on the other hand characterized by the vividness of expression which is able faithfully to convey the speaker’s intrapsychic reality.
Conclusion

The present bachelor thesis traces the development of the sonnet form in the English literature of the 16th century focusing on the major sonnet writers of the era. As the pioneers of the form, Wyatt and Surrey, drew their inspiration directly from the sonnet writing of the Italian provenance, a chapter is devoted to a short overview of the history of the sonnet in Italian literature, so that it is made clear which phase in its development in Italian literature the first sonneteers in English drew their models from. As the sonnets of Francesco Petrarca were of the utmost importance for sonnet writing in 16th England, the major English sonneteers’ approach to the literary convention Petrarch’s sonnets established is given close attention throughout the thesis. The extent in which they ventured to free themselves from it is seen as a measure of the poetic maturity and individuality of each of them, culminating in the mastery of The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.

The thesis views the sonnet form as a space where some of the major concerns of the period were debated, as a site of intersection of a variety of discourses into which these concerns had crystallized. I focused at the discursive scope present in sonnets of Thomas Wyatt, George Gascoigne, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare. The sonnet collections of these authors have been chosen as representing the overall discursive variability in the sonnets of the period. Some of the discourses were prescribed by the overwhelming influence of the Petrarchan tradition (e.g. philosophical meditations, erotic discourses), while others were given by the age’s social realities and ideological struggles. Amongst these is the political discourse present in the sonnets of Thomas Wyatt and Philip Sidney, the public-vs.-private discourse and the self-conscious literary discourse of Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella, the didactic and moral discourses of The Posies of George Gascoigne, the religious (Christian) discourse present in Edmund Spenser’s Amoretti and the homoerotic and the “mutability” discourse of The Sonnets of William Shakespeare.
Czech Resume


Tato práce nahlíží na neměnnou formu sonetu jako na místo, ve kterém nacházely literární výraz nejdůležitější problémy doby. Sonet je nazírán jako prostor, ve kterém se střetávaly nejrůznější diskursy, v něž nejdůležitější dobová témata vykrystalizovala. Tato práce přináší analýzu diskursivního rozpětí sonetů Thomase Wyatta, George Gascoigna, Philipa Sidneyho, Edmundu Spensera a Williama Shakespeara. Sonetové sbírky těchto autorů lze považovat za representativní co do tématické variability anglických sonetových sbírek šestnáctého století. Řada diskursů byla takřka předepsána směrodatným vlivem petrarkovské tradice (např. filosofická rozjímání či milostný diskurs), jiné byly dány společenskými vlivy a ideologickými zápasy tudorovské Anglie. Do této druhé kategorie spadá politický diskurs sonetů Thomase Wyatta a Philipa Sidneyho, diskurs konfliktu soukromého a veřejného v Sidneyho sbírce Astrophil a Stella, didaktický a moralistní diskurs Gascoignovy sbírky The
Posies, duchovní (křesťanský) diskurs Spenserovy sbírky Amoretti a homoerotický diskurs a diskurs proměnlivosti světa v Sonetech Williama Shakespeara.
Bibliography


