

## Metrical Art of Thomas Wyatt's Sonnets

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**Abstract:** *At the rise of the English Renaissance, Thomas Wyatt introduced from Italy the Petrarchan sonnet into English lyric poetry. To fulfill the requirements of the English language, he made an experiment to reform the metre and form. With his epoch-making effort of introducing sonnet to England, Wyatt holds an important place as a forerunner and creator of the English sonnet in the history of English literature.*

*This article makes study of the metrical structure of Wyatt's sonnet to demonstrate his great contribution to the English literature.*

**Keywords:** *Wyatt, sonnet, metre, form, rhyme, prosody.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The sonnet is one of the oldest and most useful forms in English ( Fuller, 1978, P. 1 ) .And it is Thomas Wyatt who first introduced sonnet from Italy into English literature.

Sonnet is originated from the imitation of the local poetry of Provence in Southern France. During Renaissance period many Italian poets began to write sonnets, among whom is Francesco Petrarch. In strict poetic metre and form, Petrarch expressed his idea of humanity, sung the praises and cruelty of his Laura in his hundreds of poems, mostly sonnets, so called The Italian sonnet and The Petrarchan sonnet, which made great influence on European countries by its form and the thoughts it expressed.

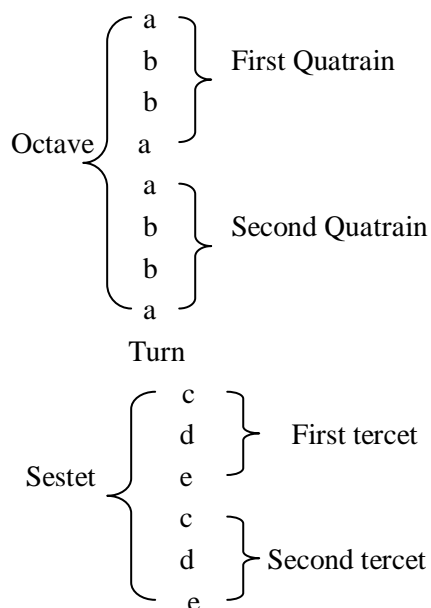
Greatly impressed by this highly artificial but beautiful form of prosody, Wyatt set about to introduce sonnet into English by translating Petrarchan sonnets.

### 2. METRICAL STRUCTURE OF WYATT'S SONNET

It is a fashion to imitate the style of Petrarch during the early period of Renaissance. But Thomas Wyatt is not merely a follower of fashion: he has got from Petrarch what he can not have got from any English models (Spearing, 1985, p.300). He imitates Petrarch for the beauty of Italian verse against the rudeness of that of England. His sonnets are the work of genuinely creative thinking.

#### 2.1. Metrical Structure of Petrarchan Sonnet

The fourteen lines of Petrarchan sonnet are of an unbalanced structure, an octave and a sestet, with 11 syllables in each line. The poetic form of Petrarchan sonnet has a special effect of beauty with complex rhyme scheme as the following:



The first eight lines (octave) forms two quatrains with the end rhyme of abba abba. But actually it is a blend of brace-rhyme quatrains with a phonological effect (Wang, 1998, 328). The rhymes of the middle four lines (abba), overlapping the sound of middle rhymes bb, echo with the first rhymes, ab, and the last rhymes ba. Such a rhyme pattern sounds melodious.

The rhyme scheme of the sestet varies considerably, sometimes taking cdc dcd or cde dce or cde ced, etc. But the number of end rhymes of the whole sonnet is not more than five.

## 2.2. Reformed Metrical Structure of Wyatt's Sonnet

The form of Italian sonnet is so complicated that it is quite hard to write in English for mainly two reasons. First, the main instinct in English poetry is for iambic or occasionally anapestic movement and most English poetry seems to shape itself in lines of moderate length, lines with a strong propensity an uneven number of time-units (i.e. five feet in each line) (Fussell, 1969, p.75). Second, there are far more vowels sounds in English than in Italian and hence fewer words to each sound, so it is harder to find rhyming words in English than in Italian (Wang, 1998, p. 340). Thus Wyatt's experimenting and innovation is the hard process of a great master of English language and English prosody.

Sonnets in English must agree with English language. Wyatt tries to work out an English equivalent in terms of line, stress, metre and rhyme scheme (Wynne-Davies, 2003, p. 32). In his version of sonnets, Wyatt brings about reforms in the metrical structure. The 29 sonnets in Rebholz's edition (1997, pp. 76-90) have eight kinds of rhyme pattern in iambic foot.

- 1) five-rhyme pattern of abba abba cddc ee , 21 poems (nos. IX, XI- XXVII, XXX-XXXII)
- 2) five-rhyme pattern of abba abba cdcd ee, 2 poems (nos. XXVIII, XXIX)
- 3) four-rhyme pattern of abba abba cdcc dd, 1 poem (no. X),
- 4) four-rhyme pattern of abba abba bccb dd, 1 poem (no. XXXVI)
- 5) four-rhyme pattern of abba abba caac dd, 1 poem (no. XXXV)
- 6) three-rhyme pattern of abba abba bcbc bb, 1 poem (no. XXXIII)
- 7) three-rhyme pattern of abab abab abab cc, 1 poem (no. XXXVII)
- 8) seven-rhyme pattern of abba cddc effe gg, 1 poem (XXXIV)

In *Tottel's Miscellany*, sonnet XXVII of Rebholz's edition (85), which is of five-rhyme pattern of abba abba cddc ee, has the six-rhyme pattern of abba acca deed ff (Parker, 1939, p. 670).

In summary, these versions of Wyatt' sonnets have the following essential features:

- 1) Some of Wyatt's sonnets retain the feature of Petrarchan style in the pattern of octave and sestet. The rhyme scheme of sonnet XXIX "The pillar perished is whereto I leant", for example, is abba abba cdc dee according to the structure of syntactic meanings.
- 2) The number of end rhymes varies from three to seven with five as the most often used.
- 3) There are ten syllables in each line mainly in iambic pentameter and the arrangement of the stressed syllables and unstressed syllables remains a little flexible.
- 4) Since the rhyming of two continuous lines demands a tighter logical unity between them than between two noncontinuous lines which rhymes, it is expected that the relation of the two lines of a couplet is very close (Fussell, p.125). Thus in metrics, by substituting a third quatrain for the first four lines of the sestet, Wyatt's sonnet forms a line structure of 4 - 4 - 4 - 2, three quatrains and a concluding couplet. That is, Wyatt's rhyme arrangement is usually abba abba cddc ee.

### 3. METRICAL VALUE OF WYATT'S SONNET

Wyatt's metric structure of sonnet is that of English. His reformation of Petrarchan sonnet is of great importance in English literature.

First, Wyatt Established the Metrical Standard in English Poetry

Before Wyatt, there were no formal standard of prosody (Jason, 2003, p. 4246). Just because of his attempted reformation of English metrical irregularity, English literature began to enjoy new poetry directed by real English metrics.

Second, Wyatt inspired the rise of English Sonnets.

The form and rhyme scheme of Wyatt's sonnet is significantly different from that of Petrarchan sonnet. With cddc ee as his common used scheme in the sestet, "the Petrarchan sonnet was already beginning to change into the characteristic 'English' structure for the sonnet, three quatrains and a closing couplet (Abrams, 1986, p. 462). Wyatt's poetic work continued by his disciple and successor Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547), who developed and improved the form, and thereafter sonnet was widely used and won increasing popularity. Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) created Spenserian Sonnet in iambic pentameter with the rhyme structure of abab bcba cddc ee in Amoretti, a sonnet sequence of 89 poems. The 154 sonnets of William Shakespeare (1564-1616), known as Shakespearian Sonnet or English Sonnet or Elizabethan Sonnet, witnessed the peak and mature period of sonnets in English literature, all in iambic pentameter rhyming abab cddc efef gg. John Donne (1572-1631) wrote 19 sonnets in The Holy Sonnets in a strict Petrarchan structure in iambic pentameter rhyming cdd cee or cdc dee in the sestet. John Keats (1795-1821) may be said to begin and end with a sonnet (Crosland, 1926, p. 198). William Wordsworth (1770-1850) wrote sonnets in the form of Petrarchan form. Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) wrote 23 sonnets with modern techniques in his work *In time of War*.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Thomas Wyatt is the leader of new English poetry. The introduction and innovation of sonnet bring an end to the rudeness and irregularity in English poetry during Renaissance. Wyatt's sonnets, in new metrical form, benefits English literature with discipline and started a new fashion in English poetry and give a new turn to prosody.

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