

**RELATIONS OF THE ELIZABETHAN
SONNET SEQUENCES TO
EARLIER ENGLISH VERSE:
ESPECIALLY THAT OF CHAUCER**

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Relations of the Elizabethan sonnet sequences to earlier English verse: especially that of Chaucer
by Daniel E. Owen

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Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences

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Chaucer

THESIS

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the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

BY
DANIEL E. OWEN
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ABBREVIATIONS.

AM	Amoretti, Spenser.
A and S	Astrophel and Stella, Sidney.
AU	Aurora, Alexander.
C	Coelia, Percy.
CA	Caelica, Greville.
CE	Caelia, Browne.
CL	Chloris, Smith.
CY	Cynthia, Barnfield.
DE	Delia, Daniel.
DI	Diana, Constable.
DL	Diella, Linch.
E	Emaricdulfe.
EKA	Ekatompathia, Watson.
F	Fidessa, Griffin.
ID	Idea, Drayton.
L	Laura, Tofte.
LI	Licia, Fletcher.
PH	Phyllis, Lodge.
P. P.	Parthenophil and Parthenope, Barnes.
SH	Shakespeare.
W. P.	Wittes Pilgrimage, Davies.
Z	Zepheria.





RELATIONS OF THE ELIZABETHAN SONNET-SEQUENCES
TO EARLIER ENGLISH VERSE, ESPECIALLY
THAT OF CHAUCER.

Wyatt's use of the sonnet in English is commonly regarded as an innovation. So far as form is concerned, this view is, doubtless, correct; but it should be remembered (a) that Wyatt's experiments do not mark the first contact of English with continental literature and (b) that the subject matter of the amatory sonnet was not altogether strange to English readers. For French and Italian influence we must go back at least to the time of Chaucer, who, indeed, so far anticipated Wyatt as to incorporate a translation of one of Petrarch's sonnets¹ in his *Troilus and Criseyde*, though he did not give his version the sonnet shape. In figure and allusion the Elizabethan sonnet bears a resemblance, often striking, to the amatory verse current in Middle English. *The Romaunt of the Rose*, the works of Chaucer, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, certain poems of Lydgate and the numerous Middle English "complaints" and lovers' dreams abound in, so-called, sonnet conceits. Chaucer's Emily² fairer than a lily, fresher than May, with her rose-like cheeks, yellow hair and voice like that of an angel is the prototype of the sonnet mistress. In a certain "Compleynt"³ the forlorn lover describes himself "as ashes dead, pale of hue," he suffers "an inward smart," his "fire is hot in every vein," the image of his lady is printed deep in his heart and he vows to serve her unendingly, even though "her heart is hard like stone." Every

¹ In Vita, 88. T. and C., I, 400-420.

² Knights' Tale, 1036 ff.

³ Appended to Schick's ed. Temple of Glas, E. E. T. S.

one of these figures and comparisons may be duplicated in the sonnet sequences.

The general character of the resemblances between the sonnets and Middle English verse may be gathered from the following list of representative parallelisms and analogues.¹ (I) Descriptions of beauty, in the sonnets, bear a general resemblance to those found in the earlier poetry. (a) Thus Gower writes:

He seth hire face of such colour,
That freisshere is than eny flour.
He seth hire front is large and plein
Withoute fronce of eny grein.
He seth hire yhen lich an hevene,
He seth hire nase straught and evene,
He seth hire rode upon the cheke,
He seth hire rede lippes eke.²

In much the same vein Thomas Watson describes his mistress in the *Ekatompathia* :

Harke you that list to hear what saint I serve :
Her yellow locks exceed the beaten gold ;
Her sparkling eyes in heav'n a place deserve ;
* * * * *
Her Eagle's nose is straight of stately frame ;
On either cheeke a rose and lily lies,
* * * * *
Her lips more red than any coral stone.³

(b) By Lydgate and others, the hair of the mistress is frequently compared to gold wire. Line 271 of the *Temple of Glas* reads:

Whos sonnyssh here, brighter than gold were.

¹ The list is illustrative, not exhaustive.

² Conf. *Amantis* VI. 767 ff.

³ Eka 7. Probably not a direct borrowing, though it looks like one. See Watson's annotation to this sonnet.

The same figure occurs in *Reson and Sensuallyte* l. 1576:

✓ Whos here as any gold wyre shon.¹

The comparison is not uncommon in Elizabethan poetry; thus, *Diella*, 3:

Her Hair exceeds gold forced in finest wire,

and *Zepheria*, 17:

Whose siluerie canopie gold wier fringes.

It is one of the figures satirized by Shakespeare in his *Sonnet*, 130:

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.²

(c) Similar figures are used in describing the cheeks of the mistress.

Temple of Glas, 276:

That Rose and lilies togedir were so meint.³

Licia, 34:

From those sweet lips, where rose and lilies strive.⁴

Phyllis, 37:

Of rose and lilies too, the colors of thy face.

II. (a) The decay of beauty is not so hackneyed a theme with the Chaucerian school as with the sonneteers; but it comes in for occasional treatment.

Troilus and Criseyde, II. 393 ff.

✓ ¹ So, also, *Troy-Book* in many places (see Schick's note to T. of G. l. 271), *Chori and Bird* 59, *Roxburghe Ballads* 62 st. 5. Used by Henryson, Lyndsay, Hawes.

² See, also, F 39, P.P. 48, De 35.

✓ ³ Compare *Doctor's Tale* 32 ff, *Knight's Tale* 1036 ff.

⁴ Compare *Di* l. 10, *A* and *S* 100, *E* 30.

'Think ek how elde wasteth every houre
 In ech of you a party of beaute ;
 And therfor, or that age thee devoure,
 Go love, for, old, ther wil no wight of thee !
 Lat this proverbe a lore unto you be :
 Too late y-war ! quod Beaute, whan it paste;
 And Elde daunteth Daunger at the laste !

'The kinges fool is wont to cryen loude,
 Whan that him think'th a womman ber'th her hye,
 "So longe mote ye live, and alle proude,
 Til crows feet be growe under your ye,
 And sende you thanne a mirour in to pryde,
 In which that ye may see your face amowre !"
 I bidde wissehe you no more sorwe !'

The tone of ill-natured protest which marks this speech is characteristic of a small class of Elizabethan sonnets of which Drayton's 8th sonnet to *Idea* may be taken as typical:

There's nothing grieve me, but that Age should haste,
 That in my days, I may not see thee old !
 That where those two clear sparkling Eyes are placed,
 Only two loopholes, then I might behold !
 That lovely arched ivory-polished Brow
 Defaced with wrinkles, that I might but see !
 Thy dainty Hair, so curled and crisped now,
 Like grizzled moss upon some aged tree !
 Thy Cheek, now flush with roses, sunk and lean !
 Thy Lips, with age as any wafer thin !
 Thy pearly Teeth, out of thy head so clean,
 That when thou feed'st, thy Nose shall touch thy Chin !
 These lines that now scornest, which should delight thee :
 Then would I make thee read, but to despise thee !

Similarly in *Aurora*, 102, the poet declares that he will think himself avenged for neglect,

When as that lovely tent of beauteie dies.¹

(b) The comparison of beauty to the flower that soon fades is common to both bodies of verse under discussion.

¹ Compare, Reason and Sensuallyte, 6207 ff.