

**PUBLICATIONS OF THE SPENSER
SOCIETY ISSUE NO 5-6;
ZEPHERIA, EKATOMPAIA, OR
PASSIONATE CENTURIE OF LOVE**

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Centurie of Love by Thomas Watson

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THOMAS WATSON

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ZEPHERIA

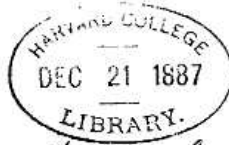
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INTRODUCTION.

IT was about the middle of the sixteenth century, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, that many of our countrymen began to make frequent journies to Italy, affected Italian manners and habits, and caused Italian literature to become exceedingly popular and greatly imitated. Among other portions of their poetry which had been introduced into England by Wyat and Lord Surrey, and had now become familiar to our writers, was the Sonnet (Petrarch of course being the model, though not long followed), a form of composition which, although attended with difficulties, was readily adopted, easily imitated, and became very common. It is quite remarkable indeed, how fashionable and general this practice of writing sonnets to the fair sex had become during the period when Petrarch might be styled lord of the ascendant in English literature, from about 1589 to 1596. Many of these sonnets were floating about in manuscript for some time among their contemporaries before they found their way into print; and

besides the more important volumes of well-known writers such as Daniel's *Delia*, Drayton's *Idea*, Watfon's *Passionate Centurie*, Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, Spenser's *Amoretti*, Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, and others which might be mentioned, at least a dozen others of less-known fame, all appearing between 1590 and 1596, might be found. Of these we may enumerate Percy's *Sonnets to the fairest Cælia* 1594, Constable's *Diana* 1594, Griffin's *Fidessa* 1596, Watfon's *Tears of Fancie* 1593, Smith's *Chloris* 1596, Barnfield's *Cynthia* 1594, Barnes's *Divine Centurie* 1593, &c.; besides other examples of a similar kind which may be found scattered among the works of our numerous poets of that period, some of them possessing great merit, such as those of Breton, Gascoigne, Lodge, Sir Walter Raleigh and others.

A disquisition on the nature and composition of the Sonnet would form a wide and difficult subject, and it is greatly to be regretted that so competent a critic as Warton did not live long enough to complete the plan he had marked out to himself in his *History of English Poetry*, of treating of the different branches of poesy in its several divisions into Satire, Sonnet, Pastoral, and Miscellaneous, having not entirely completed the first before his death. Otherwise we should not only have been treated and gratified with an eloquent and tasteful discussion on the Sonnet, but most probably with a

few remarks on the present little work. As it is, the reader must be content with the slight observations we are able to offer respecting the sonnets of *Zepheria*.

The Sonnet, under any form and circumstance, is attended with some difficulty. The narrow and confined nature of its structure, the peculiarity of its composition, its limited yet highly cultivated and polished range, all tend to increase its complexity. But it was also attended with another difficulty, for although it might be very possible in the heat of the moment or the fire of passion, for a lover to strike off two or three passionate Sonnets in praise of his mistress, it was a far more arduous task to extend these effusions in praise of his divinity through a whole volume, which necessitated her being compared with all sorts of imaginary beings, classical or otherwise. And when if a lover complimented his mistress he described her, not in the simple and artless language of nature and feeling, but in the artificial and laboured imagery of a shepherdess, or the classical strains of mythology. Allowance must be made for these hyperboles, and for the prevailing fashion of the age, in studying the poetry of the majority of these sonnet writers. A learned and judicious critic has well remarked: "It is perhaps hardly fair to read a number of these compositions in succession. Every sonnet has its own unity, and is not, it may be pleaded, to be charged with

tediousness or monotony because the same structure of verse, or even the same general sentiment, may recur in an equally independent production." It certainly becomes rather irksome to read through an entire collection of these amatory compositions without anything to break the monotony, or vary the continued metaphors and classical and mythological allusions, which pall on the mind of the reader by their familiarity and endless repetitions.

The author of *Zepheria*, whoever he was, appears to have been a warm admirer of Daniel, whose *Sonnets to Delia* had been twice printed in 1592, 4to; with him he couples Sir Philip Sidney, whose *Astrophel and Stella* had been surreptitiously put forth by Thomas Nash in 1591, 4to. He was also a great admirer of Drayton, whose sonnets in *Ideas Mirrour*, although not published until 1594, the same year in which *Zepheria* was printed, the writer of the latter might have seen in manuscript, as Drayton acknowledges that they had been written some time before they were published. Mr. Collier intimates that he was an imitator of Drayton, and "uses some of his favourite words, talking of 'Amours,' and of 'divine Idea,' and seems to aim at rather a rustic dialect." He speaks also of his having "no ear for music, and being full of conceited allusions." But we fear that in the latter respect he but followed the prevalent taste of the sonnet

writers of his age, and that even those who are considered the best models and chiefs of that style of writing, Daniel, Constable, Sidney, and Watson, nay even Spenser himself, cannot be acquitted or considered exempt from conceit.

We do not seek to deny that there exist certain faults of this kind in the present little performance, which are however still more apparent in the sonnets of some of the author's contemporaries, and may therefore be considered rather as the defects of the school than of the individual writer. And we think Mr. Collier, in his descriptive notice of *Zepheria* in his *Bibliographical Catalogue*, vol. ii. p. 554, has been rather too severe on the author's want of ear and imperfect rhymes, as many of his verses run smoothly and easily, and his epithets and similes are often appropriate and well chosen.

That this was not the only work of the author of *Zepheria* may be gathered from the tenth Canzon, in which the author speaks of his "comick poesies;" and in Canzon 11 he mentions a "pastorall Ode" which he had sent to his lady love :

How wert thou pleased with my pastorall Ode
(Which late I sent thee) wherein I thy Swayne
In rurall tune on pipe did chaunt abroad
Thee for the louelieft lass that trac'd the playne ?

He may also have written other productions which from