SONNET

A *lyric poem comprising fourteen rhyming lines of equal length: iambic *pentameters in English, *alexandrines in French, *hendecasyllables in Italian. The *rhyme schemes of the sonnet follow two basic patterns.

- 1. The Italian sonnet (also called the *Petrarchan sonnet after the most influential of the Italian sonneteers) comprises an 8-line 'octave' of two *quatrains, rhymed abbaabba, followed by a 6-line 'sestet' usually rhymed cdecde or cdcdcd. The transition from octave to sestet usually coincides with a 'turn' (Italian, volta) in the argument or mood of the poem. In a variant form used by the English poet John Milton, however, the 'turn' is delayed to a later position around the tenth line. Some later poets—notably William Wordsworth—have employed this feature of the 'Miltonic sonnet' while relaxing the rhyme scheme of the octave to abbaacca. The Italian pattern has remained the most widely used in English and other languages.
- 2. The English sonnet (also called the Shakespearean sonnet after its foremost practitioner) comprises three quatrains and a final couplet, rhyming ababededefefgg. An important variant of this is the Spenserian sonnet (introduced by the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser), which links the three quatrains by rhyme, in the sequence ababbabecedee. In either form, the 'turn' comes with the final couplet, which may sometimes achieve the neatness of an *epigram.

Originating in Italy, the sonnet was established by Petrarch in the 14th century as a major form of love poetry, and came to be adopted in Spain, France, and England in the 16th century, and in Germany in the 17th. The standard subject-matter of early sonnets was the torments of sexual

love (usually within a *courtly love convention), but in the 17th century John Donne extended the sonnet's scope to religion, while Milton extended it to politics. Although largely neglected in the 18th century, the sonnet was revived in the 19th by Wordsworth, Keats, and Baudelaire, and is still widely used. Some poets have written connected series of sonnets, known as sonnet sequences or sonnet cycles: of these, the outstanding English examples are Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophel and Stella (1591), Spenser's Amoretti (1595), and Shakespeare's Sonnets (1609); later examples include Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850) and W. H. Auden's 'In Time of War' (1939). A group of sonnets formally linked by repeated lines is known as a *crown of sonnets. Irregular variations on the sonnet form have included the 12-line sonnet sometimes used by Elizabethan poets, G. M. Hopkins's *curtal sonnets of 101/2 lines, and the 16-line sonnets of George Meredith's sequence Modern Love (1862). For an extended introductory account, consult John Fuller, The Sonnet (1972).

(III) SEE WEB LINKS

Sonnet Central: archive of sonnets with historical notes and links.