

## Milton and the Romantic Sonnet Revival

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### 1. The Characteristics of Milton's Sonnets

Milton wrote nineteen sonnets in English and five sonnets in Latin between 1620 and 1660. Although their number is small, Milton's lyric power is refined in his sonnets and the republican austerity of *Paradise Lost* is anticipated there. Milton introduced a variety of subject-matter and a new modification of the Petrarchan sonnet form, but his sonnets could not capture readers' attention after the poet's death until the last few decades of the eighteenth century. Such eighteenth-century critics as Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson, who preferred the balance and clarity of the heroic couplet over the sonnet form, criticized Milton's sonnets. Johnson, for instance, disregarded them because "Milton . . . was a genius that could cut a Colossus from a rock; but could not carve heads upon cherry-stones" (Boswell 305).

However, as the sonnet tradition revived in the mid-eighteenth century, poets such as Thomas Edward, Thomas Warton, Anna Seward and Mary Robinson and even the major Romantic poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth declared Milton's influence on their understanding of the sonnet form. Consequently, the criticism in the early eighteenth century turned into praise acknowledging - though misreading - him as a pioneer of the sonnet tradition. For instance, a comment in the *Monthly Review* of 1797 wrongly identifies Milton, rather than Thomas Wyatt, as having introduced the sonnet into English: "Milton . . . was, we believe, the first Englishman that was induced to attempt the sonnet in the language of our island" (Robinson 17). George Henderson also neglects, in his sonnet anthology written in 1803, the sonnets written before and after Milton: "Immediately after DRUMMOND, there does not appear to have been any writer of the sonnet of considerable consequence except Milton" (33). While those misleading comments undervalue the quality of Elizabethan sonnets, they serve to underline the importance accorded to Milton in the development of the English sonnet.

Milton's distinctive use of the sonnet form is apparent in form and theme. By rejecting the elaborate conceits and exaggerations of the Elizabethan sonnets, Milton turned against the practice of the Elizabethan sonneteers. In most Elizabethan sonnets, including the sonnets of Shakespeare, the quatrain division, and the octave-sestet division, are enforced by a full stop at the end of the first and second quatrains, and, in general, the use of caesurae and run-on lines is avoided in the sonnets. Milton, however, disregards the strict octave-sestet division and makes frequent use of caesurae and run-on lines in his sonnet practice. In the poet's famous sonnet on his blindness (Sonnet 19), for instance, the poem's syntax runs across the formal division between octave and sestet:

When I consider how my light is spent,  
     Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
     And that one talent which is death to hide,  
     Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
 To serve therewith my maker, and present  
     My true account, lest he returning chide,  
     Doth God exact day-labour, light denied,  
     I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent  
 That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need  
     Either man's work or his own gifts, who best  
     Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best, his state  
 Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed  
     And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
     They also serve who only stand and wait. (Milton 330)

Here, Milton demonstrates his distinct approach to the form, showing how syntax can play against the established rhyme-scheme of the Petrarchan form to give the sonnet a greater chance to attain spontaneous expressions of each thematic unit. For instance, Milton's enjambments, in lines 4-5 and 8-12, break not only the division between the first and second quatrains, but also between the octave and the sestet. His use of caesura, in addition, results in an early turn after the second foot of line 8, instead of at the beginning of the sestet. The formal qualities of the sonnet highlight the solemn turn of thought, moving from agitation to the calmness of resignation.

The subject matter of Milton's sonnets, which manifest little use of romantic Petrarchan conventions, also marks his departure from the Elizabethan sonnet tradition. Milton's sonnets are highly individuated and they record strong reactions to personal and political events. Some of them are addressed to persons like Fairfax and Cromwell, some address public matters. In his

sonnets, Milton strove for a republican spirit that revealed itself in sincerity, austerity, and simplicity of mind. Plainness of thought, the noble and energetic tone, and the formal freedom, which are reminiscent of the vigorous blank-verse movement of *Paradise Lost*, are what make Milton's sonnets distinctive from the Elizabethan sonnets which employ elaborate conceits and hyperbole.

Of his twenty four sonnets, Milton wrote seventeen sonnets between 1642 and 1658, which signifies not only his politically active years but also an unproductive period in Milton's poetic career. Nevertheless, essential Miltonic concerns such as pride, temptation, faith and acceptance, which are developed in his major poems, are already found in his sonnets. Unlike their Petrarchan models, Milton's sonnets repeatedly represent the struggle of the individual and the need for the poet to have a better understanding of himself and reality. Working against the sonnet's predetermined bipartite structure through a controlled use of run-on lines and caesurae, the poet creates dramatic movement that highlights the persona of the sonnet who progresses from doubt to reaffirming faith.

Milton's sonnet 19, quoted above, depicts a speaker in Milton's thematic antithesis between darkness and light, and between the speaker's turmoil and calmness of mind. Faced with the hardship of blindness, in the octave, the speaker becomes impatient with his loss of sight, being concerned about living in a "world and wide" (2). The octave reveals frustration, dejection and fear, all connected to the sonnet persona's desire to serve God. The sestet illustrates anxiety soothed by "Patience" (8). The word "patience" (8) signals the turn of thought that allows the speaker to see his error. He comes to understand through the virtue of endurance that he must "stand and wait" (14) to serve God. When his nervousness is soothed and his recovery is complete, the

speaker's blindness becomes a "mild yoke" (11). Thus, the sonnet presents a process of mind in which the speaker moves from doubt to confidence, from discontent to patience. The power of mind, represented as human patience, plays a central part in the process.

Milton projects in his sonnets his ideal in which the individual progresses from confusion and anger towards self-knowledge and confidence. Consequently, Milton's sonnets never forget the strength and development of the inwardness of man, and they serve the poet best as a meditative poetic form to express his sincere thoughts about himself.

Shakespeare also employs a "meditative structure" (Burrow 410) in his sonnets 12 and 15 to focus on his deepest feelings about himself. Here is sonnet 15 which contains a similar first line to Milton's sonnet:

When I consider every thing that grows  
 Holds in perfection but a little moment;  
 That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows,  
 Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;  
 When I perceive that men as plants increase,  
 Cheered and checked even by the selfsame sky,  
 Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,  
 And wear their brave state out of memory;  
 Then the conceit of this inconstant stay  
 Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,  
 Where wasteful time debateth with decay  
 To change your day of youth to sullied night,  
 And, all in war with Time for love of you,  
 As he takes from you, I engraft you new. (Shakespeare 411)

The movement from the repeated subordinate clauses in lines one and five to

the main clause in line nine, culminates in the expression of a particular wish that the young man be spared the depredations of time. Both Milton's and Shakespeare's sonnets depict the movement of the individual's strong feeling. However, whereas the conclusion of Shakespeare's sonnet is addressed to his lover, Milton's Sonnet 19 concludes with a synthesis between anxiety and calmness, and between frustration and confidence in the human mind. Thus one can see dramatic movement, in which the individual mind moves psychologically from one position to another, more clearly in Milton's sonnet.

Milton challenged the inherited Petrarchan polarities by breaking the octave-sestet division through the careful use of enjambment. Through his sonnet writing, in addition, he saw a possibility to use the conventional form as a meditative poetic form in which he could express his thoughts about vocation, virtue, blindness and faith. It is the towering personality and the sublimity of human mind that Milton achieved unprecedentedly in his sonnets; that eighteenth-century sonneteers recognized as inaugurating a new tradition; and that Coleridge and Wordsworth reproduced and intensified in their sonnet practice to highlight the power of their perceiving mind.

## 2. Milton and the Eighteenth-Century Sonnets

Milton's influence on the revival of the sonnet in the mid-eighteenth century was apparent, but his energetic and public voice was scarcely heard in the sonnets of his successors. Although eighteenth-century sonneteers, such as Thomas Edward, Thomas Warton, Anna Seward, and Mary Robinson, claimed Milton as their master, their sonnets resemble Milton's sonnets only superficially. They maintained the quatrain division and even the stronger

octave-sestet division, which had been rejected by their predecessor. The tendency to preserve, more rigidly than Milton, the formal divisions of the sonnet, while imitating Milton's use of run-on lines and caesurae to underline the thematic unity of the sonnet, became prominent formal features of the eighteenth-century sonnets.

The eighteenth-century sonnets are distinctive first because they follow the vogue for melancholy and sensibility, and secondly, for their greater appreciation of nature. Thomas Gray and Thomas Warton are the primary architects of the eighteenth-century sonnet. Gray chose an elegiac mode in his single sonnet, written in 1742 and published in 1775, "On the Death of Mr. Richard West":

In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,  
 And redd'ning Phoebus lifts his golden fire:  
 The birds in vain their amorous descant join;  
 Or cheerful fields resume their green attire:  
 These ears, alas! for other notes repine,  
 A different object do these eyes require.  
 My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine;  
 And in my breast the imperfect joys expire.  
 Yet morning smiles the busy race to cheer,  
 And new-born pleasure brings to happier men:  
 The fields to all their wonted tribute bear:  
 To warm their little loves the birds complain:  
 I fruitless mourn to him, that cannot hear,  
 And weep the more, because I weep in vain. (Gray 92)

Gray uses a variant of the Petrarchan rhyme scheme (ABAB ABAB CDCDCD) that preserves the clear distinction between octave and sestet, but

his most influential innovation was to assign an elegiac character to the sonnet. Whereas the conventional Petrarchan sonnet had illustrated a moment of love, Gray's sonnet reveals a private feeling of sadness, intensified by the juxtaposition of a pastoral morning scene and the speaker's own feeling echoed in the octave-sestet division. His elegiac mode was closely followed by successors such as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and W. L. Bowles.

Another important figure in establishing the new sonnet tradition is Thomas Warton. He wrote nine sonnets and two of them were printed in 1775 and the rest in 1777. He performed an experiment with the sonnet form independently and introduced innovative rhyme-schemes. Like Milton he employed a series of run-on lines and placed the turn at an unusual place, instead of at the end of the eighth line. In the sonnet on King Arthur's table, he introduced an octave that has a rhyme-scheme of ABBA ACCA, which was to become a dominant form in Wordsworth's sonnets. "To the River Lodon" includes a couplet at the end of the octave, making the rhyme-scheme of the sonnet, ABBA ABCC DEDEDE.

R. D. Havens placed Warton's sonnets "among the best the century produced" and noticed that "they were the first to turn for their subjects from persons to nature" (497). They were also the first to highlight the power of the pensive mind in the presence of nature. Warton's "To the River Lodon," for instance, describes "pensive Memory" through its response to a specific natural locale:

Ah! What a weary race my feet have run,  
 Since first I trod thy banks with alders crowned,  
 And thought my way was all through fairy ground,  
 Beneath thy azure sky, and golden sun:

Where first my Muse to lisp her notes begun!  
 While pensive Memory traces back the round,  
 Which fills the varied interval between;  
 Much pleasure, more of sorrow, marks the scene.  
 Sweet native stream! those skies and suns so pure  
 No more return, to cheer my evening road!  
 Yet still one joy remains, that not obscure,  
 Nor useless, all my vacant days have flowed,  
 From youth's gay dawn to manhood's prime mature;  
 Nor with the Muse's laurel unbestowed. (Warton 160)

One of the most significant aspects in Warton's experiments with the sonnet is that he rendered the form suitable for the kind of meditative description that was to find a place in the sonnets of Charlotte Smith, W. L. Bowles, and Wordsworth. The immediate response of the pensive speaker to the ceaseless flow of the River Lodon, is to ponder on the gap between the vigorous spirit of his youth and the present moment: "Ah! What a weary race my feet have run" (1). Although it is a consolation for him to have reached "manhood's prime mature" (13), the loss of "youth's gay dawn" is irreparable. Tinged with melancholy, the poet's "pensive Memory" (6) that is awakened through his engagement with external natural objects became a dominant mode for many sonneteers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In particular, Warton's symbolic use of a river, in which he implies both the consistency of nature and the ephemerality of the flow of time, is repeated in Smith's sonnets to the River Arun; in William Lisle Bowles's sonnets to rivers, to the Itchin, the Wensbeck, the Tweed, and the Cherwell; in Coleridge's "Sonnet to the River Otter"; and in Wordsworth's sonnet sequence, *The River Duddon*.

Gray and Warton introduced, on the basis of their appreciation of Milton's sonnets, a fresh structuring principle, which emphasizes formal freedom by

using run-on lines and caesurae while maintaining the octave-sestet division of the Petrarchan form, but their most important contribution to the development of the sonnet was thematic. They initiated the association of the sonnet with melancholy, grief, and self-consciousness.

After the second half of the eighteenth century, the revived sonnet tradition was developed further by a number of late eighteenth-century sonneteers such as John Bampfylde, Thomas Russell, Egerton Brydges, and Helen Maria Williams. The fundamental evolution of the sonnet, however, was directed primarily by such female sonneteers as Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson, who were also prominent writers of sentimental novels of the period.

The female sonneteers, who were the leading literary figures of the late eighteenth century, sometimes referred to as the Age of Sensibility, began to write sonnets in the 1780s. Charlotte Smith, the most distinguished of them, published the first edition of her *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1784; Anna Seward began to write sonnets in 1790 and published *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* in 1799; and Mary Robinson's sonnet sequence, *Sappho and Phaon*, was printed in 1796. In general, they deepened the tone of melancholy and the subject matter of nature, which Gray and Warton had introduced. The female sonneteers showed an excellent command of the eighteenth-century convention of expressing an isolated, melancholy sensibility.

Charlotte Smith was the most influential sonneteer among the female poets. With her *Elegiac Sonnets and Other Essays* in 1784, which went through ten editions by 1811, Smith became the first eighteenth-century woman poet to publish a sonnet collection, and the leading female figure in the modern sonnet tradition. By attaching personal meaning to natural objects, and maintaining both the persistent elegiac tone and the simplicity of the sonnet form, her

sonnets offered a model that was taken up by her romantic successors.

Smith once referred to the sonnet as “no improper vehicle for a single sentiment” (3), and she attempted to adapt that “vehicle” for her use by deviating from the Petrarchan model. She avoided the artificial formal restraints of the Petrarchan sonnet form, which she represented in the preface to her *Elegiac Sonnets* as “ill calculated for our language” (3). Thus, although she was fond of the Shakespearean form, the majority of her sonnets are written in an irregular sonnet form.

Anna Seward was also an influential sonneteer of the Age of Sensibility. She was Milton’s most devoted follower, and was convinced of her ability to accommodate the formal restraints of the strict Petrarchan sonnet form. Whereas Charlotte Smith developed the sonnet form to highlight its capacity to express feelings, Seward emphasized the formal disciplines inherited from Milton, which she eulogizes in the sestet of “To Mr. Henry Cary, On the Publication of his Sonnets”:

Our greater Milton, hath, by many a lay  
 Formed on that arduous model, fully shown  
 That English verse may happily display  
 Those strict energetic measures, which alone  
 Deserve the name of sonnet, and convey  
 A grandeur, grace and spirit, all their own. (Seward 66)

Imitating Milton, she frequently blurred the quatrain division as well as the octave-sestet division, and employed frequent caesurae in her sonnets. She only employed the Petrarchan sonnet form, avoiding completely the Shakespearean and Spenserian sonnet forms.

Despite the discrepancy between their attitudes to the sonnet form,

however, both Smith and Seward loosened the sonnet's formal restrictions, implicitly agreeing that the sonnet is a "vehicle for a single Sentiment," whether they used the Petrarchan or the Shakespearean sonnet form. That is, Milton's avoidance of the conventional regulations of the sonnet form became a key principle in both female sonneteers as well.

Havens' study of sonnets written between 1740 and 1800 reveals that the Petrarchan sonnet form outnumbered the Shakespearean form throughout the century, except during the last decade. Havens computes that 636 Petrarchan sonnets and 451 Shakespearean sonnets were published in the period (Havens 523). In the last decade, however, the Shakespearean form (270) outnumbered the Petrarchan form (199). At the risk of over-generalization, it can be deduced that eighteenth-century sonnets followed the Miltonic-Petrarchan sonnet form, which maintains the Petrarchan logic of polarity between octave and sestet, while accepting Milton's use of run-on lines and caesurae, which break divisions between quatrains and between tercets.

This general structuring discipline of the sonnet, wherein the formal division of 8+6, caesurae and run-on lines are preferred, was applied to both the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms. Anna Seward, who believed only the Petrarchan sonnet form to be legitimate and who was the most committed follower of Milton in the sonnet form, disguised the division into quatrains and tercets by the use of run-on lines and caesurae, but preserved the thematic and formal division between octave and sestet. Sonneteers such as John Codrington Bampfylde, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Robinson, who inclined to the Petrarchan sonnet form, employed one of the standard Petrarchan rhyme-schemes of ABBA ABBA CDCDCD, which maintains the division between octave and sestet. Charlotte Smith, who was opposed to the Petrarchan sonnet form, tended towards the Shakespearean model, writing also

a series of irregular sonnets, which offer variations on the Shakespearean form. Like her contemporaries, she also employed a number of run-on lines and caesurae, frequently marked by a hyphen, and maintained in many of her sonnets the structural partition of 8+6.

In the hands of the eighteenth-century female sonneteers, the sonnet became a form associated with a heightened self-consciousness. If Stuart Curran is correct in his premise that the rebirth of the sonnet “coincides with the rise of a definable woman’s literary movement and with the beginnings of Romanticism” (30), it is mostly because the trend of the new sonnet tradition favored the representation of self-consciousness, for which the women poets offered a model. However, it was the limitation of the sonneteers that their self-consciousness was displayed only through expressions of grief and melancholy.

Like Milton, the female sonneteers often express frustration through exploiting the bipartite sonnet structure, but one cannot find easily thematic synthesis or the strength of the sonnet speaker’s mind that is found in Milton’s sonnets. For instance, in “Written at the Close of Spring,” Charlotte Smith articulates irreducible sorrow through a pastoral description of nature:

The garlands fade that Spring so lately wove,  
 Each simple flower which she had nursed in dew,  
 Anemonies, that spangled every grove,  
 The primrose wan, and hare-bell mildly blue.  
 No more shall violets linger in the dell,  
 Or purple orchis variegate the plain,  
 Till Spring again shall call forth every bell,  
 And dress with humid hands her wreaths again.—  
 Ah! poor Humanity! So frail, so fair,

Are the fond visions of thy early day,  
 Till tyrant Passion, and corrosive Care,  
 Bid all thy fairy colors fade away!  
 Another May new buds and flowers shall bring;  
 Ah! why has happiness—no second Spring? (Smith 13)

The distance between the pleasant spring scene and the desolate state of the speaker's mind is irreducible, and the distance is visibly represented in the formal division between the octave and sestet. The first two quatrains represent natural phenomena as cyclical, each spring ending only to come again the following year. By contrast, the third quatrain and the couplet represent the loss of man's early visions, which promises "no second Spring" (14). In the sonnets, however, there is no such emotional resolution for her sorrow and pains as "patience," which allows Milton to "bear his mild yoke." Her sonnets, consequently, are typically much more miserable than Milton's sonnets.

Curran identifies "rootless exile" as the principal theme of Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, which offers a portrait of a woman's isolated sensibility and became the thematic prototype of the entire sonnet revival of the last few decades of the eighteenth century. Despite their limitations the sonnets of sensibility succeeded in focusing on the self, which they expressed through the first person singular within the concise and disciplined sonnet structure.

Their sentimentality is often thought to set them apart from the male literary tradition. Marlon B. Ross asserts that female poets of the century, "confronted with a hegemonic masculine tradition, attempt to write within that tradition while reshaping it for the feminine voice" (28). Because of the literary status that had been bestowed on the sonnet by Shakespeare and Milton, and through their own efforts to imbue a feminine sensibility into

poetry, the sonnet became a means through which the female poets could claim their independent literary role. With their sonnet writing, they were engaged in a significant literary project, comparable to Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetic venture in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, because their focus too was on natural human feeling overcoming the constraints of poetic form.

### 3. Milton and the Romantic Sonnets

The sonnet practice of the Romantic poets was inherited from the practice of the female poets of the preceding century. Drawing attention to the sonnet's capacity to express a heightened self-consciousness was the most important legacy of the late eighteenth-century sonneteers to the Romantics. This self-consciousness, expressed through a delicate sentimentality and frequent expressions of grief, was the quality which Wordsworth, in the early stages of his career, attempted to represent in the sonnet, as in his first published poem, "On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress" (1787). Coleridge's publication of *Sonnets from Various Authors* in 1796, which is the first sonnet anthology of the late eighteenth century, and the elegiac quality of *Sonnets, Attempted in the Manner of 'Contemporary Writers'* (1797), also reveal his indebtedness to the sonnet practice of the late eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, the most distinct contribution of the Romantic poets to the revived sonnet tradition was the way they re-established the masculine literary character that the form had been given by Milton. Although they also saw in the sonnet the possibility of representing self-consciousness, the Romantic poets did not permit this to result in an overflowing sentimentality. Instead,

they established the modes of self-consciousness that intensified anxiety over poetic vision.

The empowered self that dispenses with the characteristic melancholia of eighteenth-century sentimental sonnets, and that gives many Romantic sonnets their solemnity, is preoccupied with a moment of poetic inspiration. The sestet of Wordsworth's "There is a little unpretending Rill" (1802), for instance, demonstrates the way the poet transcends the outpouring of sentimentality in favor of a clear insight into the nature of human experience:

Months perish with their moons; year treads on year;  
 But, faithful Emma! thou with me canst say  
 That, while ten thousand pleasures disappear,  
 And flies their memory fast almost as they;  
 The immortal Spirit of one happy day  
 Lingers beside that Rill, in vision clear. (*Works* 4-5)

Although the presence of the rill reminds the speaker of the ephemerality of "ten thousand pleasures" and "their memory," the speaker elaborates in the conclusion of the sonnet a moment in which he associates the "immortal Spirit" with the rill.

The sonnets of Coleridge and Wordsworth reveal the poets' attempt to re-shape the sonnet of sensibility into the new frame of the Romantic sonnet which demanded what W. K. Wimsatt called an "imaginative *structure*," which "tends to achieve iconicity by a more direct sensory imitation" (26). This feature of the Romantic sonnets also echoes the characteristics of what M. H. Abram has labeled "the greater Romantic lyric" (528), in which the poet transcends the simple association between scenery and memory characteristic of the sentimental voices of the preceding century and develops a masculine

voices.

In addition, the Romantic poets were more flexible in their approach to the form. In the main, they shared Charlotte Smith's opinion that the sonnet is a "vehicle for a single sentiment," but they followed more closely the Miltonic sonnet form than did eighteenth-century sonneteers, and the conventional octave-sestet division was often rejected for reasons of thematic convenience. They resisted the bipartite sonnet form. In the hands of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley, the form could attain a new logic of unity that emphasizes the union between self and nature, frequently denied in the elegiac mode of their predecessors.

The variety in the rhyme-schemes of the Romantic poets' sonnets demonstrates how they privilege expressiveness over formal restriction. For instance, Coleridge combines two Petrarchan quatrains with a Shakespearean quatrain and a couplet; three Petrarchan quatrains with a couplet; and two Shakespearean quatrains with a Petrarchan sestet, rhyming EFFEFE, EFEFEF, or EEFEFF. Shelley, moreover, was the most radical of the Romantic poets in his handling of the sonnet form. He wrote seventeen sonnets, none of which uses the regular rhyme-schemes of the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet. In his irregular Shakespearean sonnets, he places a couplet after the second quatrain, as in "To Wordsworth," that has the rhyme-scheme, ABAB CDCD EE FGFG, and "Translated from the Greek of Moschus," ABAB CDCD EE FGGF, which is reminiscent of the rhyme-scheme of Keats's experimental sonnet, "To Sleep" (ABAB CDCD BC EFEF).

The Romantic poets' attitude towards the sonnet form stems from their understanding of Milton's sonnets. Wordsworth, for instance, believes that the sonnet should aim principally at unity of effect. In a letter to Alexander Dyce, written in the spring of 1833, he claims that the expressiveness of the sonnet

determines its structure, asserting the convenience of a tripartite structure, rather than the traditional Petrarchan binary structure:

It should seem that the Sonnet, like every other legitimate composition, ought to have a beginning, a middle, and an end—in other words, to consist of three parts, like the three propositions of a syllogism, if such an illustration may be used. But the frame of metre adopted by the Italians does not accord with this view, and, as adhered to by them, it seems to be, if not arbitrary, best fitted to a division of the sense into two parts, of eight and six lines each. Milton, however, has not submitted to this. In the better half of his sonnets the sense does not close with the rhyme at the eighth line, but overflows into the second portion of the metre. Now it has struck me that this is done not merely to gratify the ear by variety of freedom and sound, but also to aid in giving that pervading sense of intense Unity in which the excellence of the Sonnet has always seemed to me mainly to consist. (*Letters* 2, 604-605)

As in “Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room,” Wordsworth exploits the compactness of the sonnet form. In order to draw out the excellence of the sonnet, the poet insists on the necessity of transforming the bipartite Petrarchan sonnet into a Miltonic syllogistic structure which has “a beginning, a middle, and an end.” The Miltonic threefold structure better allows a “pervading sense of intense Unity” in the form. Jennifer Ann Wagner acknowledges the “intense Unity” that characterizes Wordsworth’s sonnets when she describes each sonnet as the expression of “a moment of heightened self-consciousness” (44).

For Wordsworth, the unity of the sonnet serves primarily to express the supremacy of the inward self and its visionary power. In “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1803” (1807), for instance, the sonnet’s

sylogistic form contributes to the expression of the flow of the poet's mind, moving from the specific view from the bridge to the sublime recognition of the city's "mighty heart":

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:  
 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
 A sight so touching in its majesty:  
 This city now doth like a garment wear  
 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
 Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
 Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
 Never did sun more beautifully steep  
 In his first splendour valley, rock, or hill;  
 Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
 The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
 Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;  
 And all that mighty heart is lying still! (*Works* 38)

The sonnet employs a three-part structure. The first part of the sonnet (1-3) draws a parallel between the external world and the visionary power of the inward self. The second (4-12) assimilates manmade objects, "ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples" (6), and the sights of nature, "the fields," "the sky," "sun," and "river." Then the third part of the sonnet (13-14) suggests the power of a poetic vision that overcomes the division between man and nature.

Wordsworth's awareness of the need for thematic and formal unity in the sonnet resulted in a liberal attitude towards the conventional sonnet form. He uses an octave which starts with a Shakespearean quatrain and ends with a Petrarchan quatrain, and often an octave which reverses this pattern. Lee M.

Johnson demonstrates that out of Wordsworth's 535 sonnets, written over four and a half decades since 1802, 210 sonnets include an octave rhyming ABBA ACCA and 99 sonnets have irregular rhyme-schemes (27).

Milton revitalized a worn-out Elizabethan form by introducing new thoughts of seriousness, directness, and simplicity to the sonnet form, and by rejecting its formal restrictions to re-construct the sonnet's logic for his own thematic convenience. The remodeled sonnet form became a principal means by which Milton represented intense feelings and the solemnity of the human mind with a confident, masculine voice. The sonnet made it possible for Milton to construct a viewpoint from which he could portray a world consisting of doubt, error, struggle and faith, and from which he could assert the significance of the solemnity and faith of the individual.

The way the sonnet carves a solid re-affirmation of man's existence and the way it transcends the form's conventional regulations, were paved primarily by Milton's sonnet writing. The eighteenth-century sonneteers and the Romantic poets who used the form for their own thematic concerns copied Milton when they employed running-on lines and caesurae, and when they registered a heightened self-consciousness whether, expressed in meditations on the profound affinities between the self and nature, or on the contradictions between imagination and experience.

Throughout its tradition, the sonnet has shown its capability to reify opposites - for instance between pain and pleasure; sorrow and happiness - and it has drifted towards the conventional theme, love. But Milton saw the possibility in the sonnet form to picture the inner landscape of self in the conflict of opposites. Departing from the Elizabethan sonnet's niceties and graces of love, Milton established a thematic procedure in which the individual

progresses toward the divine that later poets drew upon to develop the Romantic meditative poem. He broadened the scope of the sonnet's subject-matter by bestowing divinity, austerity, and simplicity upon the form, which parallel the epic atmosphere of *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, contrary to Johnson, Milton did not "carve heads upon cherry-stones," but constructed a solid channel in the sonnet so that the greatest thoughts could flow through the form in the hands of later sonneteers.

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## Milton and the Romantic Sonnet Revival

Abstract

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In the last few decades of the eighteenth century, the greatest neglect had befallen the sonnet. Although John Milton made distinct changes in the sonnet tradition in terms of subject-matter and form, his sonnets had to wait a century and a half to find an admiring reader. With his twenty four published sonnets, he introduced a new modification of the Petrarchan sonnet form. Unlike the Petrarchan models, Milton repeatedly represents in his sonnets the struggle of the individual and the need for the poet to have a better understanding of himself and reality. Departing from the Elizabethan sonnet's niceties and graces of love, and working against the sonnet's predetermined bipartite structure through a controlled use of run-on lines and caesurae, Milton established a thematic procedure – in which the individual progresses from doubt to reaffirming faith – which later poets draw upon to develop the Romantic meditative poems. It is the towering personality and sublimity that Milton achieved unprecedentedly in the sonnet form that eighteenth-century sonneteers recognized as inaugurating a new tradition; and that such Romantic poets as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats reproduced and intensified in their sonnet practice to represent the modes of self-consciousness that heightened anxiety over poetic vision.

**Key Words**

John Milton, Miltonic-Petrarchan sonnet, Miltonic syllogistic structure, individual progress, sentimentality, eighteenth-century sonnets, Romantic sonnet tradition, expressiveness

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