

**Rémi Vuillemin, Laetitia Sansonetti
and Enrica Zanin, eds. 2020.**
The Early Modern English Sonnet. Ever in Motion.
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Far from enclosing itself in the tight space of the sequence, the early modern sonnet enjoyed an enviable freedom of movement: it was, indeed, a travelling form, recklessly migrating from one genre to the other. As Vuillemin, Sansonetti and Zanin state in the introduction to this volume, the early modern English sonnet cannot be classified as a manifestation of “lyric poetry”: the variety of contexts to which it adhered deserves a deeper study of this form. With the aim to illustrate this kaleidoscopic reality, *The Early Modern English Sonnet: Ever in Motion* has been divided into four sections. The first one, “Shaping the sonnet, from Italy and France to England,” explores the relationship between the English sonnet and its continental precedents. The second section, “Performing the English sonnet,” seeks to uncover the intertextuality between page and stage. The ubiquitous nature of the sonnet is analyzed in the third section, “Placing the sonnet: sonnets isolated or sequenced.” Finally, the fourth section, “Editing the sonnet,” addresses the problematics of modern editorial policies.

In the first chapter of the volume, “English Petrarchism: from commentary on poetry to poetry as commentary,” William John Kennedy outlines the well-known history of this vogue, from the early philological commentaries on the *Canzoniere* in the mid-1500s to the rewriting of Petrarchism in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* (1609). After Wyatt’s and Surrey’s translations and adaptations of the Italian model, Sidney’s and Spenser’s sequences reshaped the predominant vogue. Both poets, indeed, resort to Petrarchism to defy it: in *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), Sidney exposes the Petrarchan lover’s foolishness through the construction of a ridiculed alter-ego, Astrophil, whereas in Spenser’s *Amoretti* (1595) marriage redeems the nameless lover’s

lust. Finally, Shakespeare contests the rewritings of Petrarchan motifs and structures by Sidney, Daniel, Spenser and others.

In order to complete the early itinerary of the sonnet, a second chapter, “Early modern theories of the sonnets,” written by Carlo Alberto Girotto, Jean-Charles Monferran and Rémi Vuillemin, explores three of the most important vernacular theories on sonnet writing. The first renovation of Petrarchism took place in Italy, where the sonnet was perceived “as an enclosed world,” and valued as a poetic form of great difficulty and harmony (34). The later French adaptation of the form demonstrates that “each national appropriation of the poetics of the sonnet left its mark on it, producing a new model” (40). During the 1590s, sonnet sequences bloomed in England, where the sonnet faced “a perilous course between didacticism, seduction and provocation” (42). The three traditions share the canonization of Petrarch as a model to be acknowledged and surpassed and the relevance of the sonnet as “an element of a larger ensemble” (50). Regarding Petrarchism, it is important to underline that the reshaping of this fashion was not limited to the Petrarchist and anti-Petrarchist teams – Vuillemin himself has argued, in a more recent article on Michael Drayton’s *Ideas Mirrour* (1594), that “the intricacies of Petrarchism” (2021, 73) deserve a more in-depth examination.

Before situating the sonnet in its most obvious environment, lyric poetry, the second section of the book explores the relationship between sonnets and drama. In chapter three, “Sonnet-mongers on the early modern English stage,” Guillaume Coatalen points at Caroline comedies as a reservoir of literary criticism: sonnets were exposed, in the performance of dramatic texts, as perpetrators of vanity, idleness, and moral distraction (63). Coatalen finds in the sonnet “a miniature play” (69), a dramatic potential that favored the transition of anti-Petrarchist motifs from sequences to comedies. Individual sonnets could also literally migrate. In chapter 4, “In and out: Shakespeare’s shifting sonnet,” Sophie Chiari focuses on “transgeneric circulation” (78): the printing of sonnets that had been previously performed made the same lines acquire new connotations. Chiari illustrates the consequences of this shifting context through a detailed commentary on the sonnets addressed by the lords to their French ladies in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, where parody is intrinsic to the

very utterance of these ridiculous love poems. Once printed in William Jaggard's religious miscellany, *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), the sonnets lost their original satiric overtones. English Renaissance sonnets participated, indeed, in a complex "collaborative poetics" (Chiari 2020, 89) which involved transcription, shortening, compiling and rewriting. These changes were not only due to the movement from stage to page: sonnets adhered to a variety of editorial genres, some of which are analyzed in the third section of this companion. In the fifth chapter, "'Small parcelles': unsequenced sonnets in the sixteenth century," Chris Stamatakis defends the claim that, from their very introduction into the English literary tradition, sonnets were read as self-sufficient compositions: in *Tottel's Miscellany*, they are labelled "small parcelles"; in their theoretical treatises, Gascoigne, Puttenham and Scott confirm the definition of the sonnet as a self-enclosed form. However, if it is true that any English Renaissance sonnet can be read independently from its "encasing framework" (100), it cannot be denied that the authorial grouping of a number of sonnets in the same sequence points at a subtle structure (Neely 1978), built upon an "horizontal axis" or "chronological narrative" and the "vertical axis" of the lover's "ongoing situation" (Bates 2001, 118). The small parcels are, therefore, more or less carefully interconnected parts of a larger construct.

The placement of a group of sonnets in an early modern volume should indeed be considered as part of that volume's possible interpretations. In chapter 6, "Gabriel Harvey's sonnet therapy," Elisabeth Chaghafi applies the previous hypothesis to her commentary on Harvey's sonnets, placed after four epistles in his *Four Letters and Certain Sonnets* (1592). The inner *dispositio* of this pamphlet plays a very specific role: Harvey's sonnets are part of his strategy to soften his tone. From the second to the fourth letter, the author's aggressiveness against Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe diminishes, and the sequence is placed as a self-healing coda to the previous angry epistles. The interpretation of a given early modern sequence can also depend on its location in the author's literary career. In the seventh chapter of the book, "Barnabe Barnes's sonnet sequences: moral conversion and prodigal authorship," Rémi Vuillemin studies the relationship between Barnes's two sequences, *Partenophil and Parthenophe* and *A Divine Centurie of Spirituall Sonnets*. Vuillemin argues that the link between both works, which share a

number of topics and images, is one of strategic recantation, “to insist on Barnes’s moral reform and construct the image of a maturing poet” (134).

The original placement of the early modern English sonnet should therefore be taken into account as a relevant criterion for any current edition of sonnet collections. In chapter eight, “*The Muses Garland* (1603): fragment of a printed verse miscellany,” Hugh Gazzard offers this fragmented verse miscellany as an example. What Gazzard finds most interesting about this work is that, contrary to the monothematically pastoral *Englands Hellicon*, which is “a record of public taste in print” (147), *The Muses Garland* gathers a variety of compositions, most of which derive directly from manuscript texts. In the last chapter, “The sonnet sequence as speech sound continuum,” Andrew Eastman proposes an approach to Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* that substitutes the original version of the text for contemporary editions. According to the author, current interpretations of Shakespeare’s sequence ignore the “poetics of the Quarto” (185), where “the basic unit is not the sonnet but the sequence” (185). Eastman’s remedy implies a rigid faithfulness to the original spelling and punctuation, even though each degree of modernization presents its advantages and disadvantages (Loffman and Philips 2018).

The Early modern English sonnet is a refreshing approach to what Marotti called “the social character of lyric poetry” (2007, 185), with specific emphasis on the relationship between different vernacular traditions, the different literary contexts to which the sonnet adhered, and the genre’s editorial idiosyncrasies. Some of the chapters are perhaps unnecessarily atomized into several minimal sections, adopting a loose structure that endangers the overall proposal’s solidity. However, this volume offers essential keys for the understanding of what the subtitle wisely reminds us: the sonnet was an itinerant form, and as such it marked new reading experiences as it adhered to different, sometimes unexpected, literary contexts.

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