

divided into two sets of quatrains and two of tercets, the quatrains never having more than three rhymes, and the tercets never more than two. The rules of rhyme and others of finer distinction have been much disregarded, especially in English, but the tendency of the best writers has been to preserve them. It has been inveighed against, as being a bed of Procrustes, compelling the poet either to barbarously curtail his thought or to senselessly expand it to the limits of his verse.

With its mechanical rules and its superannuated theme of love, love under every circumstance, every form, and in every degree, there is so little call for real and earnest thought, that men of rank, who have no poetry in their souls easily learn to arrange the conventional thought in the conventional syllables. But on the other hand, the theme of love is one in which the fancy is apt to run riot among the diversity of its creations, and taste to err from the infinite seductions to which it is exposed; hence the comparative superiority of these productions, among all poets, may be attributed in some degree to the care which it is necessary to bestow on the choice of words and images and to the setting forth of the thought in order to make it the most impressive in the given limits. Moreover, no number of rules that add beauty and form to thought can ever become restrictions to true poets, who are word-compelling. Dante bears witness that never a rhyme had made him say other than he would. A bed of Procrustes, and all levelling it may be, but this has not prevented all the greatest poets from leaving upon their sonnets, more than upon any other of their works, the impress of their own individuality. Shakspeare's sonnets give us absolutely the only glimpses of himself we have. In

them, those "wood notes wild" of his are like songs from leafless branches; "bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang," and full of the melancholy of the falling year. In Milton, too we seem to discern the stately tread, the "long resounding march, and melody divine" that are characteristic of his more ambitious works.

The earliest English writers of sonnets were Surrey and Wyatt. Both had travelled in Italy, and from a passionate study of the Italian poets, brought to their own language a finish unknown before their time. They added that characteristic of reflection, rather than imagination, which the Puritans into whose hands it descended, did so much to deepen and intensify. The Puritans have in their list of sonnet writers the names of Sidney, Raleigh, Spenser and Milton, guileless apostles of the sweetness and light that ever lurked behind the Puritan severity and gloom.

Mrs. Browning was a poet so deeply imbued with the classic spirit that the Hellenic charm could no more be missed from her works than the perfume from a flower, but her genius was like a sensitive flame that vibrated to every influence it came in contact with, and the result of her travels and studies in Italy, in those glowing sonnets from the Portuguese, are rightly considered the best of her works. Keats, Hunt and Shelly have each left the trace of Italian influence in their sonnet, while the little waifs and estrays you may find in out of the way corners of any of the magazines and newspapers of to-day which, if you take the pains to count rhymes and lines, will be found to be perfect sonnets in form at least, show that the sonnet has not yet lost all its popularity.