

And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes,
 To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;
 And specially from every shires ende
 Of Engeland to Canterbury they wende,
 The holy blisful martyr for to seeke
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seke.

(*His* – its; *soote* – fresh; *swich* – such; *licour* – liquid; *Zephyrus* – the West Wind; *eeke* – also; *inspired* – breathed into; *holt* – grove; *heeth* – field; *croppes* – shoots; ‘*Hath . . . yronne*’ – the ‘young’ sun is only halfway through its course in Aries (the first sign of the zodiac, which the sun enters at the vernal equinox, 20 March); *fowles* – birds; *ye* – eye; *hem* – them; *hir corages* – their hearts; *goon* – go; *palmeres* – palmeres (far-travelling pilgrims); *ferne* – faraway; *halwes* – shrines; *couthe* – known; *londes* – lands; *holpen* – helped; *seke* – sick.)

Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86)

As Sidney lay mortally wounded at the Battle of Zutphen, it is claimed that he gave his water bottle to another injured soldier, saying ‘Thy necessity is yet greater than mine.’ This did his reputation as the perfect Elizabethan courtier no harm at all: brave, handsome, and charming, Sidney was adored by his contemporaries and lauded by other poets. He was given a grand send-off as the first commoner to be granted a state funeral.

The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia

Sidney wanted his prose *Arcadia* destroyed on his death, but his beloved sister Mary, Countess of Pembroke, wisely ignored this. It was vastly popular, and Charles I is reputed to have quoted it on the scaffold.

My True Love Hath My Hart from *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*

My true-love hath my hart, and I have his,
 By just exchange, one for the other giv’ne.
 I holde his deare, and myne he cannot misse:
 There never was a better bargaine driv’ne.

His hart in me, keepes me and him in one,
 My hart in him, his thoughtes and senses guides:
 He loves my hart, for once it was his owne:
 I cherish his, because in me it bides.

His hart his wound receaved from my sight:
 My hart was wounded, with his wounded hart,
 For as from me, on him his hurt did light,
 So still methought in me his hurt did smart:
 Both equall hurt, in this change sought our blisse,
 My true love hath my hart and I have his.

Verse Drama

I admit that it must seem a trifle remiss to bring together best-loved poetry in the English language, while neglecting the countless examples that appear in plays written in verse. It leaves us with nothing about Marlowe’s *Helen of Troy* – the face that launched a thousand ships – or any passages from Shakespeare. However, this book would have needed twice the number of pages to do such extracts justice, and so, reluctantly, they have had to be omitted. The majority of European drama was written in blank verse for centuries, from the great Greek tragedies onwards. Apart from the grandeur that verse lends to drama, it has the practical advantage of making it easier for actors to remember their lines.

Christopher Marlowe (1564–93)

Marlowe seems more myth than man: we think him a magician, atheist, Catholic, counterfeiter, homosexual and spy, though his life is shrouded in enigmas. We do know he was a brilliant playwright who lit the way for Shakespeare, among others, with his masterly tragedies, including *Dr Faustus*. His death in a pub fight has spawned a number of conspiracy theories, including a tryst with some local lothario gone wrong, or a connection to espionage (he had been employed by the government on some shady business abroad). More prosaically, it is generally thought to have resulted from a simple row over the bill.

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love

In spoilsport Sir Walter Raleigh's 'The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd', the older poet's heroine deflates Marlowe's starry-eyed rustic, pointing out that the ravages of time and, more threateningly, the British weather will sour love's young dream.

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;

Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The shepherds' swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.

The Sonnet

The fourteen-line sonnet form originated in thirteenth-century Italy, where it was adopted by Dante and, especially, Petrarch; it takes its name from the Italian for 'little song'. Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey brought the sonnet to Henry VIII's court, and a distinct, English style emerged. The English sonnet usually has ten syllables per line, employs iambic pentameter, follows the rhyme scheme abab cdcd efef gg, and originally focused on themes of love or religious faith. Shakespeare, in particular, but also Milton, Donne, Wordsworth and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, among many others, wrote memorable sonnets, and Owen employed the form for his anguished 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'.