

# The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint

Mysterious, highly wrought poetry of desire

## Synopsis

First published as a sequence in 1609, with 'A Lover's Complaint', Shakespeare's sonnets comprise 154 poems: 126 sonnets traditionally read as being addressed to a young man, then 127–52 read as being addressed to a dark-complexioned mistress, with a final pair, 153–4, on Cupid. 'A Lover's Complaint' is a narrative poem of 329 lines in the genre of 'complaint', depicting an abandoned woman lamenting her seduction.

## Context and composition

It is clear that some of Shakespeare's sonnets were circulating in manuscript at the end of the sixteenth century, and two, 138 and 144, were published as the opening poems in the volume *A Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), which contains a majority of poems by other writers, many unattributed.

Sonnets had entered the English tradition in the first half of the sixteenth century via Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, who produced translations of the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch. Petrarch's sonnets, dedicated to Laura, depicted the speaker's unrequited love for a distant and unattainable woman (it is a matter of debate, although ultimately irrelevant, whether Laura ever existed) and set the tone for the sonnet's ongoing poetics of impossibility. The sonnet is a fourteen-line poem, and, whereas for Petrarch this was divided into an eight-line section (the octave) and a six-line (sestet), often rhymed a-b-b-a-c-d-d-c e-f-g-e-f-g, in English, the form developed into three four-line sections (quatrains) and a final couplet, often rhymed a-b-a-b c-d-c-d e-f-e-f g-g (sometimes called the Shakespearean sonnet). The couplet form gave the English sonnet an epigrammatic quality of final summary,

# Sonnets And A Lovers Complaint

**Tobias Bleicker**



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