

“The Italianate Englishman:” The Italian Influence in Elizabethan Literature

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Whether it was thought of positively or negatively, Italy is a popular topic of discussion in Elizabethan literature. Some Elizabethan writers mimic Italian writers and incorporate Italian ideas into their own works, while other writers alter Italian literary conventions and openly attack Italian morals. This range of positive and negative sentiments towards Italy ultimately reveals the existence of a love-hate relationship between England and the Italian Renaissance that became a foundation of Elizabethan literature. My paper illustrates how various Elizabethan writers, including Sir Thomas Wyatt, Edmund Spenser, and William Shakespeare, demonstrate their awe for the Italian Renaissance by imitating Italy’s greatest poets and integrating Italian ideas into their texts, reveal their feelings of inferiority and jealousy towards Italy’s literary and social progress through their efforts to improve upon Italian literature, and show a genuine fear of Italy’s negative influence on English morals and values by using their works to warn against Italians’ immoral natures.

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Whether it is described as “the Apothecary-shop of poison for all Nations” (Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse, His Supplication to the Divell*, 1592, as cited in Jones 251) or “the fairest Lady, yea the richest Paragon and Queene of Christendome” (Thomas Coryat, *In Praise of Venice*, 1611, as cited in Bate 160), Italy is a popular topic of discussion in Elizabethan literature. Some Elizabethan writers mimic Italian writers and incorporate Italian ideas into their own works, while other writers alter Italian literary conventions and openly attack Italian morals. The range of positive and negative sentiments towards Italy ultimately reveals the existence of a love-hate relationship between England and the Italian Renaissance, a relationship that greatly

influenced Elizabethan literature. A closer look at Elizabethan literature shows that Italian culture influenced England society by serving as an inspiration for creativity and as an outlet for criticism. Elizabethan writers treat Italian culture in three main ways: they demonstrate their awe for the Italian Renaissance by imitating Italy’s greatest poets and integrating Italian ideas into their texts; they reveal their feelings of inferiority and jealousy towards

Italy’s literary and social progress through their efforts to improve upon Italian literature; and they show a genuine fear of Italy’s negative influence on English morals and values by using their works to warn against Italians’ immoral natures.

When England was first exposed to the Italian Renaissance, the country was

impressed and inspired by Italian literature, and Elizabethan writers show their support for Italian culture by mimicking Italian literary structure and promoting Italian ideals, particularly those of love, in their texts. One such Elizabethan writer is Sir Thomas Wyatt, who is recognized for introducing Italian conventions into English literature. Wyatt greatly impacted Elizabethan literature by becoming the first major English writer to translate Italian poetry into English. Wyatt's translations introduced England to Italy's understanding and conventions of love, and these revolutionary ideas enlightened English writers. Jonathan Bate confirms this idea by arguing that Italy provided illumination for the English:

The Italian mirror was a strong, sometimes a distorting one, but what it reflected back to the Elizabethans were some of the supremely influential images of their age [...] The English Renaissance began when Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey discovered, translated and imitated the poetry of Petrarch. (p. 71)

Bate credits Wyatt with initiating the English Renaissance because he exposed England to Italian society by translating Francesco Petrarch, who was and still is considered one of Italy's greatest poets. Petrarch is famous for a number of different works, but one of his most influential pieces was *Rime sparse*, a collection of 366 lyric poems revering a woman named Laura. Petrarch idolized Laura through specific love metaphors and turned her into a symbol for the ideal woman, which became the conventional norm when his lyrical poetry was popularized. His poetic style ultimately "gave rise to Petrarchism in the

Renaissance, which was the main medium of poetic dialogue in countries as far away from Italy as Portugal and the Czech Republic" (Finucci, 2005, p. 457). Writers throughout Europe were inspired by Petrarch's work and popularized his style by using his metaphors in their own love poetry. By translating Petrarch's poetry, Wyatt introduced the Italian sonnet to England and started a trend of exalting the Italian idea of love through imitation. Wyatt himself honors Italian love conventions by imitating Petrarch; He helped popularize Petrarchan conventions and imagery in Elizabethan poetry by using them in his own poems. In his sonnet "Farewell, Love," Wyatt incorporates Petrarchan love imagery, such as references to Cupid's arrows, and echoes Petrarch's view that being in love is painful: "Farewell Love, and all thy laws forever, / Thy baited hooks shall tangle me no more" (as cited in Greenblatt and Abrams, 2006, p. 596.1-2). Wyatt began a movement by inspiring numerous English poets to honor Italy by imitating Petrarchan sonnets.

One of the numerous English poets influenced by Petrarch was Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney styles his great sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* on Petrarchan sonnets; he not only copies Italian sonnet structure but also endorses the Italian concept of Neoplatonism, a religious philosophy based on the teachings of Plato. One aspect of Neoplatonism is the concept that the search for love is a quest towards spiritual enlightenment: "the final revelation in the Greater Mysteries of Love—the vision of the Beautiful itself—will be disclosed only to those who follow a particular path of eroticism" (Ferrari, 1992, p. 256). Neoplatonism is illustrated in "Sonnet 5" from *Astrophil and Stella*:

True, that true beauty virtue is indeed,
Whereof this beauty can be but a shade,

Which elements with mortal mixture
 breed;
 True that on earth we are but pilgrims
 made,
 And should in soul up to our country
 move. (As cited in Greenblatt and
 Abrams, 2006, p. 976.9-13)

In this sonnet, Sidney discusses the concept of the three levels of Platonic love, which is the idea that love is a journey from the senses (the body) to reason (the mind) and from reason to the highest level of understanding (the soul). By incorporating the Italian concept of Platonic love into his poetry, Sidney shows a respect for Italian ideals. Like Wyatt, Sidney helped to praise and spread Italian culture to England through his work.

Support for Italian culture and ideas also made its way into Elizabethan prose. The most famous example is Sir Thomas Hoby's translation of Castiglione's Italian masterpiece *The Courtier* into English, which introduced the concept of Platonic love and proper courtly behavior to Elizabethan society. In Hoby's time, the British admired Italy as "the birthplace of new learning and the rediscovery of classical civilization" (Partridge, 2007, p. 772), and the English elite hoped to achieve the same level of Italian sophistication by mimicking Italy's courts. Hoby translated *The Courtier* because he believed it "offered an excitingly expansive vision of what a Renaissance courtier could, and should, be" (Partridge). *The Courtier's* influence on the English court is best exemplified by Sidney himself, as he was considered the ideal English courtier by how he demonstrated the desired courtly traits found in Castiglione's work. Thus in both poetry and prose, Elizabethan writers exhibit their admiration for Italian literature by imitating Italy's celebrated authors and assimilating Italian philosophy into their texts.

As Italy's influence grew in England, many Englishmen became jealous of its impact. The Italian Renaissance put Italy years ahead of England in many fields, and the English began to suffer from what was essentially an inferiority complex, as they were concerned that English literature was viewed as poor in comparison with that of Italy by the rest of the world. This led to a new trend in Elizabethan literature where English writers built upon and directly challenged Italian poetic conventions, particularly those established by Petrarch, in an effort to improve upon Italian literature and establish the greatness of their own country's work.

The inclination to improve upon Petrarchan poetic conventions is found in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. Sidney's imitation of Petrarch did honor Italian concepts of love, but he also deviated from Petrarchan structure in order to break away from Italy's control on poetry. *The Norton Anthology's* (Greenblatt and Abrams, 2006) introduction to *Astrophil and Stella* elaborates on this idea:

Petrarch had deployed a series of ingenious metaphors [...] but by Sidney's time the metaphors – love as a freezing fire, the beloved's glance as an arrow striking the lover's heart, and so forth – had through endless repetition become familiar and predictable, less a revelation than a role. Sidney, in the role of Astrophil, protests that he uses no standard conventional phrases that his verse is original and comes from his heart (p. 975).

Sidney uses Petrarch as a starting point, but he makes a conscious effort to be unique by breaking away from Petrarchan conventions, which were considered overdone during his lifetime. Sidney was able to reduce the hold

that Italy had over Elizabethan literature by using new ideas – English ideas – in his work. By working to transform Italian conventions, Sidney created his own original conventions that succeeded in highlighting and encouraging Elizabethan creativity.

Another example of the movement to break away from Italy's and Petrarch's influence in order to showcase English creativity is illustrated in the poetry of Edmund Spenser. Spenser strived to become England's greatest epic poet, and like Sidney, he was inspired by Italian poetry but altered Italian conventions to create works more unique to England. In his sonnet sequence, *Amoretti*, Spenser borrowed Petrarch's conventional love lament but transformed it by giving the sonnet sequence a happy ending in which the lovers unite. In "Sonnet 74," Spenser writes about three revered women in his life but shows that he treasures his lover the most:

The third my love, my lives last ornament,
 By whom my spirit out of dust was raised:
 To speake her prayse and glory excellent,
 Of all alive most worthy to be prayed.
 Ye three Elizabeths for ever live,
 That three such graces did unto me give
 (As cited in Greenblatt and Abrams, 2006, p. 906.9-14).

The speaker says that his lover, Elizabeth, is a gift from the graces, suggesting that she is a gift he actually possesses. This implies that he and his lover are united in bliss rather than separated in misery as typically portrayed in Petrarchan love poetry. "Sonnet 75" upholds this idea, as the speaker promises to immortalize his lover in his work. By altering Petrarchan conventions in his poetry, Spenser challenged Italy's

literary influence and highlighted England's creativity.

Perhaps the most famous example of anti-Petrarchan poetry is William Shakespeare's sonnets. Throughout his collection of 154 sonnets, Shakespeare repeatedly breaks away from the literary precedent established by Italian poets and both creates his own metaphors for love and twists typical love conventions popularized by Petrarch. A prime example of how Shakespeare blatantly contradicts Petrarchan love conventions is Sonnet 130, in which the narrator cross-examines his lover's description to Petrarch's portrayal of the ideal woman and "mocks the standard vocabulary of praise" (Edmondson and Wells, 2004, p. 15):

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,
 Coral is far more red than her lips red,
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun,
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks,
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
 I grant I never saw a goddess go:
 My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.
 (As cited in Greenblatt and Abrams, 2006, p. 305.1-14).

Shakespeare uses this sonnet to directly attack Petrarchan conventions. Shakespeare reverses the Petrarchan image of the idealized and unattainable blond, blue-eyed goddess (conventions established through Petrarch's description of Laura) and describes his mistress as being the opposite of Petrarchan imagery; she has dark-colored hair, skin tone, and eyes; her voice is not musical; her step is not light; her breath is not sweet. At first reading, it appears as though the speaker is insulting his mistress, as he repeatedly concludes that she falls short of the Petrarchan ideal; but by comparing his mistress to "the litany of Petrarchan metaphors, the poet declares his love as beautiful as any woman ever described with such hyperbole" (Callaghan, 2007, p. 145). The speaker makes it clear that his mistress is better than Petrarch's superhuman lover because his mistress is real and not an unrealistic fantasy. The poet suggests that Petrarch's perfect woman doesn't exist; therefore, his love is greater and more extraordinary because he loves his mistress for exactly who she is, flaws included.

Shakespeare also directly opposes Petrarchan poetic conventions by dedicating a majority of his sonnets to the adoration of a fair young man rather than a fair young lady as typically idolized in Italian love poetry. Petrarch's poetry is known for its adoration of women, but in Shakespeare's first 126 sonnets, "the Petrarchan poet-lover is ostensibly in love with a member of 'the opposite sex'" (Hedley, 1994, p. 2), thereby contradicting a major Petrarchan construction. Shakespeare defied Petrarchism by ignoring or directly opposing Italian love constructs in his work, and the popularity of his poetry helped establish both himself and England as literary greats. By altering and building upon Italian literary conventions, Petrarchan conventions in particular, Elizabethan writers, like Sidney,

Spenser, and Shakespeare, express a desire to rise above the Italian influence and establish the English Renaissance as a worthy period in literature.

Over time, a general envy of Italy evolved into open condemnation and a genuine fear of Italy's negative influence. England grew to fear Italy's corrupting influence (particularly Italy's support for violent revenge and Catholicism) on English morals and values, and Elizabethan writers began using their works to caution England against Italy's immoral nature.

An example of how Englishmen are cautioned against the vices of Italy is Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster*. Ascham devotes a section of *The Schoolmaster* to explain in detail the negative consequences of Italy's influence on a typical Englishman:

He that by living and traveling in Italy bringeth home into England out of Italy the religion, the learning, the policy, the experience, the manners of Italy. That is to say, for religion, papistry or worse; for learning, less, commonly, than they carried out with them; for policy, a factious heart, a discoursing head, a mind to meddle in all men's matters; for experience, plenty of new mischiefs never known in England before; for manners, variety of vanities and change of filthy living (As cited in Greenblatt and Abrams, 2006, p. 644).

Ascham openly criticizes Italy for being a blasphemous, ignorant, conflicting, mischievous, and vain society that hides behind an enchanting façade and bewitching words. Ascham voices England's concern that Italy attracts good Englishmen with the intent to destroy their values; he hoped to expose Protestant students to Italy's vices and power of corruption so that they "might defend themselves against the Devil's and

Rome's rhetoric before the world ends, for the sake of their own salvation as well as England's" (Stark, 2008, p. 518). Ascham's essay serves as a warning to prevent Englishmen from becoming *Inglese italianato è un diavolo incarnato* (as cited in Greenblatt and Abrams, 2006, p. 643) and going astray.

One English author who was particularly outspoken against Italy's negative influence was Spenser. In his great epic *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser reshaped the Italian canto format to create his own unique English poetic structure. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* was partially inspired by Italian works, as he was "the first English poet to divide his poem by the *canto*, like the Italians, and to use that term" (Giamatti, 1975, p. 33); yet like his contemporaries, Spenser altered traditional Italian poetry in an effort to demonstrate England's literary prowess. Spenser took the octave format found in Italian chivalric romance and fashioned his own stanza format that included a ninth line, known as an Alexandrine line. By altering Italian poetic structure, Spenser reflected England's negative mentality towards Italian literature and made an effort to overpower Italian poetic authority by replacing it with his own.

Spenser also revealed a negative disposition towards Italy by turning Book I of *The Faerie Queene* into anti-Catholic propaganda. One of the allegories for Redcrosse's journey "from faith to unfaith and back again" (Evans, 1970, p. 109) in Book I is of England's real-life conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism, and Spenser reveals an almost hateful denunciation of the Catholic faith through his treatment of Catholic and biblical imagery. One example is Spenser's description of the beast Error, who functions as a direct metaphor for Catholicism's own evil propaganda. Error is a foul beast – half serpent, half woman – who feeds a thousand

young offspring and whose vomit consists of books and papers. She is a direct symbol for the evil monster that is Catholicism and how Catholicism breeds and supports a multitude of wicked followers with its poisonous message of false faith. Error's vomit is also a metaphor for the literal propaganda that Catholicism creates to share its wicked message; like actual vomit, the Catholic word is disgusting and spreads like a sickness. Spenser further reiterates Error as a symbol for false religion through his account of how the offspring feast on their mother's corpse until they burst:

To see th' unkindly Impes of heaven
accurst,
Devoure their dam; on whom while so
he gazd,
Having all satisfide their bloody thirst,
Their bellies swolne he saw with
fulnesse burst (as cited in Greenblatt
and Abrams, 2006, Bk. I.i. p. 726.227-
30).

Once again, the offspring represent Catholic followers who feed on false faith, but Spenser also suggests that Catholics are so dependent on false doctrine that they will continue to feast on Catholicism until it kills them, without ever satisfying their thirst for holiness and redemption. By repeatedly referencing false faith and Catholic imagery in his description of Error and its offspring, Spenser uses Error to represent Italian Catholicism as a dangerous false religion that will cause significant harm to England.

Spenser uses negative religious imagery in other character descriptions to reveal and reject Catholicism's wickedness as well. He associates the villain Archimago with Catholic priests through Archimago's use of *Ave Maria* prayers and sermons, and he uses Archimago's deception of Redcrosse as a parable to criticize how Catholic priests trick followers into believing in a false faith, a

faith that takes them further away from the true holiness of “godly Protestantism” (Heale, 1987, p. 4). Spenser also compares the evil Duessa to the Whore of Babylon from the Book of Revelations in the bible, which was interpreted by Protestants as the Catholic Church (Heale), to make her a metaphor for how Catholicism sells itself in an attempt to entice followers and defeat Protestantism. He also uses Duessa’s downfall to foreshadow the ultimate defeat of Catholicism at the hand of Protestantism. Spenser’s negative spin on Catholic imagery in his character descriptions in *The Faerie Queene* makes Book I anti-Catholic propaganda that exposes Catholicism’s and Italy’s evil nature and potential negative impact on Protestant English society.

Another text that portrays Italy in a negative light is John Lyly’s *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*. Lyly describes the Italian city of Naples as “(a place of more pleasure than profit, and yet of more profit than piety), the very walls and windows whereof shewed it rather to be the Tabernacle of Venus than the Temple of Vesta” (as cited in Greenblatt and Abrams, 2006, p. 945). By associating Naples with Venus’ passion and sexuality and not Vesta’s chastity, Lyly portrays Naples as a lustful, immoral, and impious city and in turn discourages the

English from traveling there. Like Ascham, Lyly contributes to the widespread fear of Italy’s influence by vilifying Italy in his work. Motivated by a fear of Italy’s powerful and corruptive control over England, Elizabethan writers, including Ascham, Spenser, and Lyly, use their works as cautionary tales against Italy’s wicked society.

Through the poetry and prose of Elizabethan writers, Italy and Italian culture are treated both positively and negatively in Elizabethan works, revealing England’s love-hate relationship with the Italian Renaissance. English writers were inspired by Italy and its progressive thoughts, particularly the country’s ideas and treatment of love; but Englishmen were also jealous and fearful of Italy’s growth and impact on the world, and thus made efforts to improve upon Italian literature and denounce Italian religion and culture in order to promote and demonstrate England’s prowess in the world. Regardless of whether it was thought of positively or negatively, the Italian Renaissance had a powerful and lasting effect on Elizabethan England that became a foundation of Elizabethan literature.

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