I believe that the four sonnet sequences, by Lady Mary Wroth ("A Crowne of Sonetts dedicated to Love"), Mary Robinson (Sappho and Phaon), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Sonnets from the Portuguese) and Christina Rossetti ("Monna Innominata"), discussed in this article, have an erotic power and a sexual appeal that the great male sonnetteers do not achieve, indeed may not even aspire to achieve. Of course, I may be falling into a characteristic male trap here: when the lascivious thoughts of a woman or her explicit sexual behaviour is revealed, in most instances men are aroused not because of what the woman involved may say or do, but simply because it is a woman doing and saying. However, I hope that in the course of this article I will be able to demonstrate that the eroticism discerned in these sequences is not simply the product of an ingrained masculine bias.

In these sets of sonnets there is a formal as well as an erotic symmetry: the first and last of them, by Wroth and Rossetti (the Prologue and Epilogue to this article) each consist of fourteen poems. This particular symmetry is not entirely unexpected: Wroth’s sequence is called “A Crowne of Sonetts” – “The Crowne, or corona an Italian poetic form in which the last line of either a sonnet or stanza served as the first line of the next”; and in which the “number of sonnets (stanzas) could

1 This “Crowne” is from her larger sonnet collection, Pamphilia to Amphilanthus that “appears in a separately numbered section following the prose romance, The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania” (Introduction to The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth, ed. Josephine A. Roberts, Baton Rouge, paperback edn, 1992, 42 – all the texts of Lady Mary Wroth’s poems quoted are from this edition).
2 The dates of the first publication of these works, although not necessarily of their writing, are respectively 1621, 1796, 1850, and 1881.
3 A point already touched upon in Bart Veldhoen’s “Reason versus Nature in Dunbar’s ‘Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo’” in this volume (see page 51 above).
vary, from seven to as many as fourteen”.⁴ Christina Rossetti’s “Monna Innominata” is “A Sonnet of Sonnets”,⁵ although it is not a corona. There is no reason to suppose that Christina Rossetti knew Wroth’s work at all, but in their different ways they both draw upon an established Italian tradition.

Christina Rossetti did, of course, know Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry and expressed her admiration for her and her Sonnets from the Portuguese in her prefatory note to “Monna Innominata”. But it is unlikely that either knew Mary Robinson’s Sappho and Phaon. And here there is an unexpected symmetry, since both Sappho and Phaon and Sonnets from the Portuguese consist of forty-four sonnets. So with these four sets of sonnets, we have two sequences of forty-four sonnets enclosed between two sequences of fourteen sonnets. What else do they have in common? How do they differ? And, more relevant to the concerns of this book, in what respects may they be considered erotic achievements, even, to risk a compromising term, “masterpieces”?

As far as form is concerned all four poets in their distinctive ways play with conception of the Italian, or, as Mary Robinson would have it, the “legitimate”, sonnet.⁶ All four sequences are presented to the reader

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⁵ The subtitle of Rossetti’s “Monna Innominata”. Compare the sequence of twenty-eight sonnets, “Later Life”, in the same 1881 volume, A Pageant and Other Poems, subtitled “A Double Sonnet of Sonnets”.

⁶ See Mary Robinson, Sappho and Phaon, London, 1796, 5-8 (all quotations are taken from this edition). However, although her rhyme schemes may be “legitimate” (ABBAABBA CDCDCD) which clearly divides her sonnets into the Petrarchan structure of eight and six, in most cases there is very little shift in tone or argument at the beginning of line 9, and characteristically line 8 more often ends with an exclamation mark than a period. In thirty sonnets line 8 ends with an exclamation mark, and in five sonnets there is a question mark. In one sonnet, XXXXIX, surprisingly enough, there is an enjambement. Only eight sonnets close the octave with a period. Christina Rossetti also keeps close to the Italian model, and in all but one sonnet the octave and the sestet is divided by a period (in the odd one out it is a question mark), but her rhyme schemes are quite various. Nine of the sonnets have the same rhyme scheme in the octave (ABBAABBA), but each of the other five sonnets has a different rhyme scheme (ABBAABBA CDDCDE). In the sestets, the first and the seventh sonnets share a rhyme scheme (CDECE), as do the sixth and twelfth sonnets (CDECE); each of the other ten sonnets have a different rhyme scheme in the sestet. By occasional use of near rhymes, half rhymes, even Byronic rhymes (for which she was much criticized), Elizabeth Barrett Browning follows a regular rhyme scheme throughout the whole sequence (ABBAABBA CDCDCD), but formally, and even rhetorically, the volta hardly exists and syntactically the