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A STUDY OF WORDSWORTH'S
SONNETS UPON THE PUNISHMENT OF DEATH

by

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I. Introduction

Capital punishment had been a common practice in England since Anglo-Saxon times, and was generally regarded as necessary, if society were to survive. But in 1764 Cesare Beccaria published Essays on Crimes and Punishments which proposed abolition of capital punishment, and which began a crusade for bringing about the end of this most severe retribution. This movement was carried on by liberal politicians such as Jeremy Bentham, Sir Samuel Romilly, John Bright, and William Ewart.¹ In 1837 Parliament passed a bill which removed the punishment of death from about two hundred offences, leaving it applicable only to treason, murder, and a number of lesser cruel and violent crimes. Soon after this law was enacted, Fitzroy Kelly introduced a subsequent bill which would have abolished capital punishment from all crimes except treason and murder.² The bill was quite popular and "obtained no inconsiderable support in the House, and at one time even a majority, but was ultimately defeated by Robert Peel."³ Despite this political defeat the crusade went on, and in 1840, seventy-six years after Beccaria's influential essay, the first resolution for the total abolition of capital punishment was brought before Parliament; and, although the resolution was not passed, ninety members voted in its favor.⁴

It was in this same year, 1840, and in this same political climate that William Wordsworth was writing his Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death. According to Mary Moorman, the poems "had been written chiefly in the early summer of 1840. . . ."⁵ It seems, however, that a good number of them were written before that summer of 1840; in a letter dated 27 January

1840, Wordsworth wrote Edward Moxon that "The Sonnets upon Capital Punishment which I sent you, then no more I believe than 4, are now 11."⁶ In February of 1841 the sequence contained thirteen sonnets, and at that time Wordsworth considered having them printed in a newspaper; he decided not to, however, since gross printing errors plagued earlier publications of his poems in newspapers.⁷ But in December of 1841 Wordsworth allowed Henry Taylor to print the sonnet sequence, along with Taylor's comments, in the Quarterly Review of that month.⁸ This appears to be the first actual publication of the Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death.

Wordsworth's fourteen-poem sequence, completed in 1841, presents an argument against proponents of abolition. By examining both social and moral aspects of the issue, he builds a case for the preservation of capital punishment. The sonnet sequence begins by presenting social arguments for capital punishment: the first poem, for example, states that even the sight of the prison is a threat--and therefore a deterrent--to those who would take another man's life. The second poem maintains that compassion and pity must be felt for the victim and his family, rather than for the murderer. The third sonnet suggests that duty to society must overrule the parental compassion that often prevents retribution for capital crimes. And the fourth, fifth, and sixth sonnets explain what will result if capital punishment is abolished: the general mind of society will be debased, the humblest functions of state will suffer, and ancient beliefs will no longer hold the power of prevention if the murderer does not pay with his life.

In the seventh sonnet Wordsworth introduces the religious aspect of his argument, saying that if Christ's mandates are stretched to the point of forgiving all crimes, social order cannot exist. Wordsworth goes on to