

POETICALLY SPEAKING

Volume 2, Issue 5

March 2025

THE SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET

BY

KENNETH DANIEL WISSEMAN

In the early 14th century Francesco Petrarca made the Sonnet form popular during the Italian Renaissance with his unrequited love poems to a lady by the name of Laura; and as is typical of sonnets he praised the lady highly, though sadly his love was never returned. So popular was this new form amongst the Italian poets of that era that it soon swept across Europe and into England. Poets like Chaucer were highly influenced by Petrarch's works and was the first English poet to translate a Petrarchan Sonnet, adapting it within his epic poem *Troilus and Criseyde* on lines 400-469 of Book I. Yet it was not until 200 years later that this long-forsaken form would blossom again in England, during the Tudor Dynasty. That literary flower was Thomas Wyatt's translation of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, a collection of 366 poems, composed mainly of love sonnets.

'Sonnet 132' from II Canzoniere

By Petrarch

Translated and Adapted By Geoffrey Chaucer ¹

Form: Rime Royal

Language: Middle English

Cantus Troili

58

'If no love is, O God, what fele I so?
And if love is, what thing and whiche is he!
If love be good, from whennes comth my wo?
If it be wikke, a wonder thynketh me,
Whenne every torment and adversitee
That cometh of him, may to me savory thinke;
For ay thurst I, the more that I it drinke.

¹ An excerpt from *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited from numerous manuscripts by the Rev. Walter W. Skeat (2nd ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899). 7 vols.

59

And if that at myn owene lust I brenne,
 Fro whennes cometh my wailing and my pleynte?
 If harme agree me, wher-to pleyne I thenne?
 I noot, ne why unwery that I feynte.
 O quike deeth, O swete harm so queynte,
 How may of thee in me swich quantitee,
 But-if that I consente that it be?

60

And if that I consente, I wrongfully
 Compleyne, y-wis; thus possed to and fro,
 Al sterelees with-inne a boot am I
 A-mid the see, by-twixen windes two,
 That in contrarie stonden ever-mo.
 Allas! what is this wonder maladye?
 For hete of cold, for cold of hete, I deye.'

During Queen Elizabeth's rule, the Sonnet became the most popular lyrical form for Renaissance poets, creating 'little songs' in praise of beauty and of love. One in particular, a playwright for the Globe Theater and contemporary of Christopher Marlowe, became the most famous poet of all time, his name was William Shakespeare. Though developed into the form that bears his name by the poets Thomas Wyatt and Sir Henry Howard, in the capable hands of Shakespeare it was perfected and became the epitome of the perfect poetic form to express the internal struggles of the human heart. Of all the forms of sonnets, only two shine brighter than all the rest in the English language: one is the Petrarchan, the other form I shall delve into in more depth.

The Shakespearean Sonnet is a lyrical poem made up of three Sicilian quatrains followed by a heroic couplet. Each quatrain should be considered a whole thought, image, or argument contained within the boundaries of four lines, with the final line end-stopped. Usually, but not always, the poem addresses someone in a fond way, and typically of a romantic nature. It is comprised of fourteen lines, written in iambic pentameter, meaning five feet of ten syllables, with the stress of each foot falling on the second syllable. An example would be:

■ if **THERE** | be **NOTH** | ing **NEW**, | but **THAT** | which **IS**

An occasional variation in the meter is acceptable, but only when thoughtfully used.

Typically, much like the Petrarchan, the octave or the first eight lines, tend to develop an idea, or question with ever-increasing tension. Then, somewhere with the final quatrain, the tension is released with a stunning statement, which contrasts greatly with all previous thoughts in its tone, usually beginning with but, yet, for, when, or then. This resolatory turning or twist in a sonnet is known as the volta. The placement of the volta varies, but between the 8th and 9th line being a more common placement (sonnet 18), no doubt the influence of Petrarch was still felt by the bard. But, traditionally Shakespeare placed it at the end fourth quatrain, between the 12th and 13th line. Yet, sometimes he even placed it within his final thought, making the heroic couplet even more dramatic than it already is, as in Sonnet 30:

'Sonnet 30'²**By William Shakespeare**

Form: SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET

Language: Early Modern English

When to the Sessions of sweet silent thought,
 I sommon vp remembrance of things past,
 I sigh the lacke of many a thing I fought,
 And with old woes new waile my deare times waste:
 Then can I drowne an eye (vn-vf'd to flow)
 For precious friends hid in deaths dateles night,
 And weepe a fresh loues long since canceld woe,
 And mone th'expençe of many a vanniht fight.
 Then can I greeue at greeuances fore-gon,
 And heauily from woe to woe tell ore
 The sad account of fore-bemomed mone,
 Which I new pay as if not payd before.
 But if the while I thinke on thee (deare friend)
 All loffes are reftord, and forrowes end.

The most difficult part of the Shakespearean Sonnet lies in the last two lines, the heroic couplet. Unlike the Italian sonnet, the English sonnet does not have the luxury of six lines to bring about closure. Bound up in a mere two lines (the couplet), it must sum up the poem's very meaning, resolving all questions posed in the previous 12 lines. This is the last lingering thought left by the poet, hence must be memorable. Truly, in this case, brevity is the soul of wit. Such a constraint ends itself well to those able to create a witty saying, a satirical punchline, or a brief yet poignant commentary on the human condition, a quality already on display upon the stage: hence Shakespeare must have been naturally drawn to this particular form, and mastered it with ease.

THEMES OF SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's themes often varied and were not always about romantic love. Here are a few of the themes he did write of:

- The various forms of love.
- The dangers of love.
- True beauty and false beauty.
- Time as the enemy of love.
- Cheating death.
- The eye and its connection with the heart.
- Nature: flowers (roses), trees, stars, and seasons.

² An excerpt from *The Sonnets*, Quarto I (1609.) Full Title: SHAKESPEARES SONNETS. Neuer before Imprinted. AT LONDON .By G. for T.T. and to be folde by William Afpley 1609.

METER

Iambic Pentameter: Shakespeare's meter was very strict save for a few exceptions. Sometimes he used feminine lines. And of note, he did make great use of trochees, namely for artistic reasons: like recreating the sound of ocean waves. Yet, his iambic meter was almost always pure. It has been said that iambic meter sounds much like the human heart, which I find very poetic since his poems were poems about the human heart.

FORM

Three Sicilian quatrains followed by one heroic couplet

4-4-4-2

RHYME SCHEME

abab cdcd efef gg

COMPOSITION

1st Quatrain — An exposition of the main theme and main metaphor.

2nd Quatrain — Theme and metaphor extended or complicated; often an imaginative example is given.

3rd Quatrain — The peripeteia or turning point is often introduced somewhere within these four lines: the volta is usually indicated by a variant of the adverb therefore, placement can vary.

Couplet — Summarizes and leaves the reader with a new concluding image.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Here are a few helpful tips on writing a sonnet:

- Avoid repetition and clutter: you must not try to fill the lines with too much imagery as you only have 14 lines to express your thoughts. Hence, each quatrain should expand upon the previous thought, while at the same time not repeating the exact same imagery.
- Have fun with wordplay, in other words, use words or phrases with double meaning, or contrast with another in some way, ironic, or even words with a similar sound but entirely different meaning. Shakespeare was known for his stunning wordsmithing skills.
- Use mid-line and end-of-line pauses at times whenever it helps to express one's natural way of pausing whilst pondering a deep in thought.
- Enjambment helps to create a flowing feeling to a thought.