

A Selection of Sonnets:
Styled Upon Period Sonnet Forms from
the
14th – 16th Centuries

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Sonnet Redactions

Sonnet I (English Style)

Grey skies doth greet the icy morning air,
New snow o'er misty mountains slyly peeks;
For thee my loving heart hath been laid bare,
And left to drown in sorrow, black and bleak.
Thy soured love doth take my heart to rend,
And turns desires passionate flame to ice;
No love being left, mere evil intend –
Smiling thus, thou scorneth my sacrifice.
Yet like new buds slumber, in beds of earth,
Upon Springs rays, my heart doth long await,
For in the golden light I find rebirth,
And with it recede all vestige of hate.
Thy poisoned love, a memory past,
Thus leaving my heart unto peace at last.

Sonnet II (Spenserian Style)

Where shall I go to hide my heart and weep,
For loss and grief permit me not to stay.
How shall I mourn they ill-timed, endless sleep,
But howling curse the budding month of May?
Should I but sit and sob upon thy grave,
While violent tears pour forth a storm of rage--
My faith hath been lost, no more prayers to say.
As ink grown pale upon memories page,
Thy face recedes, fading with passing age;
This loss doth pain my heart, now sorrow filled.
No more to know a Father's wisdom, sage,
Despite how my fervent pleas may so will.
Consumed by grief, thy image grown so cold,
Loving thee still, thy memory fight to hold

Sonnet III (Italian Style)

With chains forged strong, as tho by fire,
my heart, a slave, is bound to thee,
and drink me thus, thy lips like wine,
enflame my passion and desire.
Thus burns my soul upon loves pyre.
And so to smoulder, through all time,
this heart that beats as thine,
crowns thou my truest Love and 'Sire'.
Tho loving heart doth name thee King,
and adoration give to thee,
I must await church bells to ring,
my sweet and heartfelt song to sing.
Thy wedded wife at last to be,
my soul to fly aloft and wing.

Summary of Project

This project consists of a selection of sonnets, written within the 2 weeks (what can I say, this was a last minute entry). I undertook this challenge, in addition to my others, because I've always been interested in poetry, and over the years have written a variety of poems myself. Despite my interest and dabbling as a poet, I have never paid much attention to sonnets as a poetry form, nor have I attempted to write one.

What is a Sonnet

Although a variety of sonnet forms currently exist, only three are period forms – the Italian (also called Petrarchan), the English and the Spenserian. Sonnets are, at the most basic level, a fourteen line, lyric poem, which may or may not follow a strict rhyming format (many modern sonnets have no rhyme – and some would argue no reason either), often with 10 syllables per verse. Although many sonnets use iambic pentameter, some use hexambic or other formats. Usually sonnets tell a story, present/solve a problem, often called the 'volta' or 'turn'. In period, all three sonnets had strict rhyme forms, with several differences which will be outlined in the following sections.

Italian Sonnets

The Italian Sonnet or 'sonetti' meaning 'little songs' is generally credited to Petrarch (14th c.), who it is said, used the form to write poems for a married woman whom he loved (Pennsylvania State University, 2004; Canadian Federation of Poets, 2005). This is in fact an error as Petrarch's work merely served to raise the Italian sonnet as an art form. Italian sonnets by Giacomo da Lentino appear in the 13th century Giacomo da Lentino (essortment, 2005, Pennsylvania State University, 2004), although some note that they lack the life and vibrancy of Petrarch's later work (Canadian Federation of Poets, 2005).

Italian sonnets are distinguished by their division into the octave and the sestet. The octave is the first eight lines which presents the problem/situation or narrative and has a rhyming pattern of *abbaabba*. In contrast, the sestet consists of the last six lines, which are used to drive home the narrative, continue the proposition or solve the problem, with the volta usually appearing at the start of line 9. Sestets can have three different rhyming forms: *cdecde*, *cdccdc*, *cdcdcd* or *cdedce*. It should be noted that Italian sonnets, unlike their English cousins, do not always have the same number of syllables in each verse, nor do their English translations infallibly rhyme in the manner mentioned above.

Petrarch's Sonnet 140

Amor, che nel penser mio vive et regna
 e 'l suo seggio maggior nel mio cor tene,
 talor armato ne la fronte vene;
 ivi si loca et ivi pon sua insegna.

Love, who rules my thinking as his empire
 and in my heart has placed his principal throne,
 like a warrior storms into my forehead's dome,
 sets up his flag and makes his outpost there.

Quella ch' amare et sofferir ne 'nsegna
 e vol che 'l gran desio, l'accesa spene
 ragon, vergogna, et reverenza affrene,
 di nostro ardir fra se stessa si sdegna.

She who teaches me to love and suffer
 and who wishes reason, modesty and reverence
 would tame my great desire and wild exuberance,
 casts aside and denigrates our ardor. So, terror-
 stricken, Love flees to my heart,
 abandoning his war-plans and his tents,
 and lays there hopeless, trembling, and laments.

Onde Amor paventoso fugge al core,
 lasciando ogni sua impresa, et piange et trema;
 ivi s'asconde et non appar più fore.

When my lord is afraid, what is my part
 but to stay with him until the final knell?
 For his end is good, who dies by loving well.

Che poss' io far, temendo il mio signore,
 se non star seco infin a l'ora estrema?
 ché bel fin fa chi ben amando more.

The Italian sonnet I have written (Sonnet III, below) corresponds to the rhyming scheme used by Petrarch in the above original Italian version of Sonnet 140 (*abbaabba cdccdc*).

Redaction: Sonnet III

With chains forged strong, as tho by fire,
my heart, a slave, is bound to thee,
and drink me thus, thy lips like wine,
enflame my passion and desire.
Thus burns my soul upon loves pyre.
And so to smoulder, through all time,
this heart that beats as thine,
crowns they my truest Love and 'Sire'.
Tho loving heart doth name thee King,
and adoration give to thee,
I must await church bells to ring,
my sweet and heartfelt song to sing.
Thy wedded wife at last to be,
my soul to fly aloft and wing.

'cheerful' of the three.

Comments:

I found the Italian sonnet the most difficult to write, as the rhyming sequence is very different from the more 'traditional' English sonnet form that I'm familiar with. Additionally, I can completely see how creating rhymes over 4 verses, made this form frustrating in English, leading to the later sonnet forms. I may try this form again in the future, as I think with practice it may get easier. Despite this being the most difficult poem of the three to write, it is actually my favourite – not to mention the more

English Sonnets

In the early 1500's Sir Thomas Wyatt, an English diplomat, brought Petrarch's sonnets to England and translated them, raising their use among English poets. However writing Italian style sonnets in English is a laborious task, due to the abundance of words ending in consonants, unlike Italian where most words end in vowels, thus giving poets a plethora of rhymes to work with. It is important to note that Elizabethans referred to short poems in general as 'sonnets', whereas the 14 line lyric poems with specific rhyming patterns were terms 'quatorzains' (Otis and Needleman, 1967). Henry Howard, Earl of Surry¹ (1517-1547) is credited with establishing the English sonnet form of *abab cdcd efef gg*. Although this form is frequently called 'Shakespearean', this is actually a misnomer.

Shakespeare Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold	In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang	That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,	As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.	Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day	This thou perceiv'st, which makes they love more
As after sunset fadeth in the west;	strong,
Which by and by black night doth take away,	To love that well which thou must leave ere long.
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.	

In addition to the different rhyming sequence, the volta in English sonnets can occur at any point from verse 9 to verse 14 – Shakespeare in fact, has been known to delay the volta until the ending couplet (verses 13 -14). Frequently the final couplet is used to strongly drive home the message, often with puns, or pithy retorts. Another important difference is the change in syllables.

¹ It is interesting to note that the Earl of Surry was the uncle of Edward de Vere, who is a central contender in the debate regarding Shakespeare's identity (Wells, 1995).

Redaction: Sonnet I

Grey skies doth greet the icy morning air,
New snow o'er misty mountains slyly peeks;
For thee my loving heart hath been laid bare,
And left to drown in sorrow, black and bleak.
Thy soured love doth take my heart to rend,
And turns desires passionate flame to ice;
No love being left, mere evil intend –
Smiling thus, thou scorneth my sacrifice.
Yet like new buds slumber, in beds of earth,
Upon Spring's rays, my heart doth long await,
For with the golden light I find rebirth,
And with it recede all vestige of hate.
Thy poisoned love, a memory past,
Thus leaving my heart unto peace at last.

English sonnets are typically written in iambic pentameter, which usually has ten syllables, with every other syllable being stressed (5 stresses per verse). My attempt at an English sonnet (Sonnet I) is shown below.

Comments:

The English sonnet was the first one written, and came relatively easy (completed in under an hour). However, upon further research I learned that English sonnets have 10 syllables per verse, which my original sonnet did not have.

Although I do not naturally write in 10 syllable verses, I was actually very consistent in writing

these sonnets (all three), in that the first drafts all had exactly 8 syllables per line – I guess that is just the 'meter' my mind feels is right. I did go back and rework the first draft of my English style sonnet, making each verse fit the required 10 syllable form. As a result, some of the lines sound a bit stilted to me...something I hope to fix with further reworking.

Spencerian Sonnets

In the late 1500's, Edmund Spenser introduced a variation of the sonnet form in his sonnet cycle *Amorretti* ('little love poems') (Otis and Needleman, 1967). According to 'Sonnet Central', the *ababbcbccdedee* rhyming form of the Spenserian sonnet, appears to be an outgrowth of the pattern he used in "The Faerie Queene" (*ababbcbcc*). Spenser also would signal the volta in line 9 with the words 'But' or 'Yet', but upon closer reading, the actual turn doesn't happen until the pattern changes for the couplet (*ee*). The Spenserian sonnet is also differentiated from both the Italian and English forms, in the way the ideas are organised into groups:

Italian	English	Spenserian
octave (abbaabba)	quatrain 1 (abab)	quatrain 1 (abab)
sestet (cdecde, cdcdcd, cdedce)	quatrain 2 (cdcd)	quatrain 2 (bcbc)
	quatrain 3 (efef)	quatrain 3 (cdcd)
	couplet (gg)	couplet (ee)

Spenserian sonnets appear to be a combination of the Italian and English formats, with three sets of double rhymes (a, d and e), and two groups of four rhymes (b and c). Wherein the other sonnet types, a change in rhyme sequence should also signal a significant change in metaphor/topic, the overlapping rhymes of b and c in the Spenserian sonnet, signal a sideways step of metaphor/topic, rather than a significant departure.

Spenser Sonnet LIV

Of this World's theatre in which we stay,
My love like the Spectator idly sits,
Beholding me, that all the pageants play,
Disguising diversely my troubled wits.
Sometimes I joy when glad occassion fits,
And mask in mirth like to a Comedy;
Soon after when my joy to sorrow flits,
I wail and make my woes a Tragedy.

Yet she, beholding me with constant eye,
But when I laugh, she mocks: and when I cry
She laughs and hardens evermore her heart.
What then can move her? If not mirth nor moan,
She is no woman, but a senseless stone.

Comments:

This sonnet was originally written in the English style, with 8 syllables per verse. However in reworking it to the correct number of syllables, I found that with a bit of tweaking of verse order, it could rather easily be turned into a Spenserian sonnet. Although a more morbid topic, this sonnet is special to me because I wrote it on what would have been my father's 60th birthday.

Redaction: Sonnet II

Where shall I go to hide my heart and weep,
For loss and grief permit me not to stay.
How shall I mourn they ill-timed, endless sleep,
But howling curse the budding month of May?
Should I but sit and sob upon thy grave,
While violent tears pour forth a storm of rage--
My faith hath been lost, no more prayers to say.
As ink grown pale upon memories page,
Thy face recedes, fading with passing age;
This loss doth pain my heart, now sorrow filled.
No more to know a Father's wisdom, sage,
Despite how fervent my pleas may so will.
Consumed by grief, thy image grown so cold,
Loving thee still, thy memory fight to hold.

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