

The Petrarchan or Italian Sonnet: The History

The sonnet was first written in Italy in the early thirteenth century. The revolutionary nature of the form was due to the fact that it was composed in the language of the people rather than that of the church and officials, Latin. Also it was created to serve a private function, that of the love letter between men and women and designed to be read quietly to oneself, rather than orated in public.

The Italian sonnet came to be known as the Petrarchan because Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), called Petrarch, developed it into the form one is familiar with today. Petrarch also established the convention of the sonnet sequence as a series of love poems written by an adoring lover to an unattainable and unapproachable lady of unsurpassed beauty. The Petrarchan sonnet convention, in other words, established, not merely the form of the poem, but also the subject matter. Most of his sonnets express his chaste love for a woman known only as Laura, to whom he addressed his poems.

The Italian (or Petrarchan) Sonnet: The Form

He is credited with the first well-known sonnet form: the fourteen lines are arranged in two stanzas. The octet presents the theme or problem of the poem; in contrast, the sestet presents a change in thought or a resolution of the problem. Often the octet will pose a problem or paradox which the sestet will resolve. The first eight lines represent a dilemma, such as a quest for ineffable adoration, while the final six lines focus on the resolution, for instance how the lover resigns himself to his adored one's loss. There is often a "volta" or turn between these two parts.

The Italian sonnet is divided into two sections by two different groups of rhyming sounds. The first 8 lines are called the *octave* and rhyme:

a b b a a b b a

The remaining 6 lines are called the *sestet* and can have either two or three rhyming sounds, arranged in a variety of ways:

c d e c d e c d c d c d c d d c d c c d e c e d c d c e d c

The exact pattern of sestet rhymes (unlike the octave pattern) is flexible. In strict practice, the one thing that is to be avoided in the sestet is ending with a couplet (dd or ee), as this was never permitted in Italy, and Petrarch himself (supposedly) never used a couplet ending.

The Italian (or Petrarchan) Sonnet: Petrarch's "Sonnet 164"

Petrarch (1304-1374) is considered "the first writer of the Renaissance." Although his Italian sonnets rely on courtly love conventions, the Renaissance sees a sort of codification of the material and certainly of the form.

ITALIAN

Pace non trovo, et non ò da far guerra; a
e temo, et spero; et ardo, et son un ghiaccio;b
et volo sopra 'l cielo, et ghiaccio in terra;a
et nulla stringo, et tutto 'l mondo abbraccio.b

Tal m' à in pregion, che non m' apre né serra,a
né per suo mi riten né scioglie il laccio;b
et non m' ancide Amore, et non mi sferra,a
né mi vuol vivo, né mi trae d' impaccio.b

Veggio senza occhi, et non ò lingua et grido;c
et bramo di perir, et cheggio aita;d
et ò in odio me stesso, et amo altrui.e

Pascomi di dolor, piangendo rido;c
egualmente mi spiace morte et vita:d
in questo stato son, donna, per voi.e

ENGLISH

I find no peace, and yet I make no war:
and fear, and hope: and burn, and I am ice:
and fly above the sky, and fall to earth,
and clutch at nothing, and embrace the world.

One imprisons me, who neither frees nor jails me,
nor keeps me to herself nor slips the noose:
and Love does not destroy me, and does not loose me,
wishes me not to live, but does not remove my bar.

I see without eyes, and have no tongue, but cry:
and long to perish, yet I beg for aid:
and hold myself in hate, and love another.

I feed on sadness, laughing weep:
death and life displease me equally:
and I am in this state, lady, because of you.

Petrarchan love conventions:

the poet (male) addresses a lady (corresponding to Petrarch's Laura).

she often has a classical name like Stella or Delia.

the poet-lover praises his mistress, the object and image of Love, with praise for her superlative qualities using descriptions of beauty supplied by Petrarch: "golden hair," "ivory breast," "ruby lips."

the poet employs contradictory and oxymoronic phrases and images: freezing and burning, binding freedom (see Petrarch's #134).

the poet-lover dwells only on the subjective experience, hence on the misery of being in love: thus the occasional appearance of the conventional invocation to sleep to allay the pain (insomnia poems).

the poet disclaims credit for poetic merits: the inspiration of his mistress is what makes the poetry good, he claims.

the poet promises to protect the youth of his lady and his own love against time (through the immortalizing poetry itself).

The Italian (or Petrarchan) Sonnet: Wordsworth's "London, 1802"

The major point for consideration is that the sonnet is divided into two sections by the two differing rhyme groups. In accordance with the principle (which supposedly applies to *all* rhymed poetry but often doesn't), a change from one rhyme group to another signifies a change in subject matter. This change occurs at the beginning of L9 in the Italian sonnet and is called the *volta*, or "turn"; the turn is an essential element of the sonnet form, perhaps *the* essential element. It is at the *volta* that the second idea is introduced, as in this sonnet by Wordsworth:

"London, 1802"

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour: a
England hath need of thee: she is a fen b
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen, b
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower, a
Have forfeited their ancient English dower a
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men; b
Oh! raise us up, return to us again; b
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power. a
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart; c
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea: d
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free, d
So didst thou travel on life's common way, e
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart c
The lowliest duties on herself did lay. E

Here, the octave develops the idea of the decline and corruption of the English race, while the sestet opposes to that loss the qualities Milton possessed which the race now desperately needs.