Connections ◆ The Sonnet

Much of the nature of *sonnets* arises from one simple characteristic of their form: sonnets are short. Sonnets therefore develop a single, self-contained topic, often as a first-person expression of the speaker's emotions. When a poet chooses to write a sonnet, he or she participates in a tradition of writers who have spent centuries exploring the limits and possibilities that a fourteen-line form creates. Every word and beat of a sonnet, even more than those of other traditional verse, carries a heavy burden of tradition and association, calling to mind an Italian tradition identified with Petrarch, an English tradition identified largely with Shakespeare and Milton, and generations of later sonneteers who have revised and adapted the sonnet tradition.
In its most conventional form, a sonnet in English contains fourteen lines of *iambic pentameter*--a meter whose typical lines have five feet of two syllables each, with the second syllable stressed in each foot. (See Lines and Feet in the Terms section for more on iambic pentameter and its alternatives.) Poets and critics tend to group sonnets into the two major categories mentioned above: *Petrarchan* and *Shakespearean* (also called Italian and English, respectively). The following pages explain those categories.

The Petrarchan (or Italian) Sonnet

The sonnet form developed first in Italian poetry; at one time, the term "Italian Sonnet" would have been redundant. One variant of the Italian form, one used by Petrarch and Dante, came to be recognized as the form we now call Petrarchan or Italian. (I will hereafter use "Petrarchan.")
The *Petrarchan sonnet*'s defining characteristic is a strong division between the first eight lines of the sonnet and the last six. The first eight lines, the *octave*, establish the subject of the poem in a certain way, and the next six, the *sestet*, counter the octave by shifting the perspective of the poem in some way. The place where the poem turns from the octave to the sestet is therefore called the *volta*, which is Italian for "turn."

The rhyme scheme of the most traditional Petrarchan sonnet consists of two sets of four lines rhymed *abba* (each of these is called an *Italian quatrain*), followed by rhymes of *cdecde* in the sestet. While the rhymes of the octave are relatively stable in Petrarchan sonnets, poets tend to vary the rhymes of the sestet, using many different combinations of the *c*, *d*, and *e* rhymes to round out the poem.

Because Petrarch's sonnets often expressed a male speaker's desire for a woman (see Al Drake's page on Petrarch's sonnets for examples), the Petrarchan sonnet form carries associations with that mode of address. Perhaps predictably, many later writers have used the Petrarchan form in ways that subvert the content inherited from Petrarch. For example, take this sonnet, number 22, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's book *Sonnets from the Portuguese*:

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
Until the lengthening wings break into fire
At either curvèd point, -- what bitter wrong
Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented? Think. In mounting higher,
The angels would press on us, and aspire
To drop some golden orb of perfect song
Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
Rather on earth, Belovèd, -- where the unfit
Contrarious moods of men recoil away
And isolate pure spirits, and permit
A place to stand and love in for a day,
With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

Note the ways in which Barrett Browning's sonnet uses and departs from the Petrarchan tradition.

The Shakespearean (or English) Sonnet

The English language, with its wide variety of word endings and vowel sounds, does not produce musical, effortless rhymes as easily as Italian does. A density of rhyme that works in Italian poetry can therefore sound strained in English. As a result, English variants of Italian poetic forms will tend to increase the poet's flexibility in rhyme; the English version of the sonnet, for instance, features seven rhymes rather than five, thus requiring less repetition of the poem's rhyming sounds. Conventional *Shakespearean sonnets* are easy to spot. Once you see a poem of fourteen lines--by now, "sonnet!" should leap into your head at that point--you can look at the last two lines to see if they rhyme. If they do, you are almost certainly beholding the closing couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet. That couplet closes the Shakespearean sonnet with a bang, replacing or supplementing the Italian volta with a break between the first twelve lines (divided into three quatrains) and the final two, which give a brief summarizing or retrospective statement. The Shakespearean sonnet's rhyme scheme reads *abab cdcd efef gg*; the volta comes after the twelfth line.

As a clever reader, you have probably deduced by now that this sonnet form is associated with Shakespeare. You can see the form in action through this, one of the most famous of Shakespeare's sonnets (number 130):

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
I grant I never saw a goddess go:
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

(In the final line, note the archaic use of the pronoun "she," which functions as a synonym for "woman.")