

The Sonnet
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ENGL 2323
British Literature I

Basic format

- Italian *sonnetto*, ‘little song’
- Iambic pentameter – five iambs (unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable)
– — / — / — / — / — /
– My **mis**|tress’ **eyes** | are **noth**|ing **like** | the **sun**
- Fourteen lines made up of octets (a group of eight lines), sestets (six lines), quatrains (four lines), or couplets (two lines)

Variations

- The sonnet is one of the most experimental forms out there
- There will often be resolved syllables or insertions of trochees (/ —) or other feet to emphasize certain words, so there will not be 100% conformity to iambic pentameter
– Spenser especially – Alexandrine line (iambic hexameter)
- Petrarchan (Italian) sonnets – an octet, rhymed *abbaabba*, and a sestet, rhymed either *cdecde* OR *cdccdc* OR *cdcdcd*
– A lot of words have the same endings, so rhyme somewhat trickier
- English sonnets can follow these patterns, and many do, but ability to make various words rhyme inspires many variations
- Elizabethan/Shakespearean sonnet – three quatrains and a couplet, rhymed *abab cdcd efef gg*, but again with many variations
– Sidney – *abba abba cc deed, abba abba cddc ee*, for example

Things that we see in sonnets

- Social distance of some sort between poet and beloved
- Love is often unrequited
- Elaborate metaphors
- Pastoral (shepherd-like, rural) elements
- Classical references

Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542)

- Born into a noble Yorkshire family, although they were in Kent near the court
- Server in Henry VIII’s court in 1515
- Cambridge-educated
- Accompanied Earl of Bedford to Rome to seek Henry’s annulment from Catherine of Aragon
- 1524 – Ambassador of the king
- 1535 – knighted; 1536 – Sheriff of Kent
- Was rumored to have had an affair with Anne Boleyn; was imprisoned at the Tower in 1536
- 1540 reinstated, but accused of treason in 1541; Catherine Howard, later queen, got the

charges removed

- Ancestor of the Lee family in Virginia and of Wallis Simpson

Wyatt's poetry

- 31 sonnets, ten of which are translations of Petrarch's from the Italian
- 65 others with various forms – rondeau, ottava rima, terza rima, epigrams, and others
- London, British Library, Egerton MS 1782 – partial autograph of 123 works, including translations
- *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) published after his death – 33 poems not in Egerton

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1516-1547)

- Descended from Edward I paternally and Edward III maternally
- Raised in Windsor with Henry Fitzroy; later married Henry's sister
 - Was a cousin of Anne Boleyn
- Served in the army in Henry VIII's wars against France
- Had a hot temper and was frequently jailed
- Part of ambassadorial entourage of French king Francis I
- Family was very aristocratic and disdained the newly-raised courtiers; ran afoul of Thomas Cromwell
- Henry VIII believed that Surrey planned to usurp the crown through his connection to Fitzroy; when Surrey included William the Conqueror's arms on his own, he was accused of treason and executed
 - Technically, though, he was entitled to bear them

Surrey's poetry

- With Wyatt, one of the first poets to write sonnets
 - Three quatrains and couplet form in iambic pentameter
- Also one of the first to write longer works in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter); translated *Aeneid* III and IV

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86)

- Shrewsbury school
- 1571 - Oxford, but didn't take a degree; went to Continent
 - Witnessed the St. Bart's day massacre in France - became firmer Anglican
- 1575 - Returns to England - becomes involved with partisan politics
 - became a courtier and went on several missions for the crown, but Elizabeth kept him at arm's length

Sidney, politics, and poetry

- 1579 or so - the *Defense of Poetry* - response to Gosson's *School of Abuse*
- 1580- when Elizabeth's marriage to the Duke of Anjou was proposed, he opposed it, and was dismissed from court
- 1580-84 - writes *Astrophil and Stella*, *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*
- 1585 - Named governor of Flushing in Netherlands
- 1586 - killed fighting the Spanish

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)

- Education
 - 1561, Merchant Taylor's school
 - 1569 Pembroke Hall, Cambridge
 - 1576 Cambridge MA
- 1578 Secretary to Bishop of Rochester
- 1579 confidential emissary of Earl of Leicester
 - Publishes *Shepherd's Calendar*

Spenser in Ireland

- 1580 secretary to Lord Grey de Wilton, Lord Deputy of Ireland; lives in Dublin Castle
 - holds several administrative posts in Ireland
- 1585 occupies Kilcolman castle
- 1590 1st edn. *Faerie Queene* (3 books)
- 1594 marries Elizabeth Boyle
 - 1595 publishes *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*
- 1596 2nd edn. *Faerie Queene*
- 1598 Irish rebels sack Kilcolman - flees to Cork w/wife; loses child in the sack of the castle
- 1599 Dies in London while arguing for tougher Irish policy

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

- Famous for his plays, but also wrote 154 sonnets
 - A series to a “fair youth” urging to marry, but then also with some homoerotic suggestions
 - A series to a “dark lady” who may have been involved with both him and the fair youth
- Will go into more detail on him when we read his drama