

Lecture 15: Sonnets, or All about Cupid

Painting of *Cupid Chastised*

by Bartolomeo Manfredi (1586-1622)

[1

What is a sonnet?

A little lyric poem, usually about love.

In English, the term “sonnet” **now** usually means a 14-line poem in iambic pentameter—

A 10-syllable or 5 foot line, with five regular stresses alternating with 5 unstressed syllables

Chaucer: **Whan** that **April with** his **showres soote**

The **drought of March** hath **perced to the roote**

Marlowe: Is **this the face** that **launched a thousand ships**

Shakespeare: Shall **I compare** thee **to a summer's day**

Thou **art** more **lovely and** more **temperate**

with a regular rhyme scheme, is usually defined by division into an octave (first 8 lines) and a sestet (last 6)

Italian/Petrarchan: *abba abba cde cde* (or *cddc ee* or *cdcdcd*—as in Wyatt's translation of Petrarch below)

Elizabethan/Shakespearean: *abab cdcd efef gg* (Surrey)

Spenserian: *abab bcbc cdcd ee*

All of this seems pretty artificial, doesn't it?
It gets worse:

The sonnet vogue in English begins with
Sir Thomas Wyatt's (1503-1542) translations of Petrarch.
The *Rime sparse* of Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374);
in 1327 he "fell in love with" a woman named Laura,
whom he "loved" from a distance until her death in 1350,
and to whom he wrote poems until he died.

Here is Wyatt's translation of *Rime* 140: (B 594)

<i>The long love that in my thought doth harbor,</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>And in mine heart doth keep his residence,</i>	<i>b</i>
<i>Into my face presseth with bold pretense,</i>	<i>b</i>
<i>And therein campeth, spreading his banner.</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>She that me learneth to love and suffer,</i>	<i>a?</i>
<i>And will that my trust and lust's negligence</i>	<i>b</i>
<i>Be reined by reason, shame, and reverence,</i>	<i>b</i>
<i>With his hardiness taketh displeasure.</i>	<i>a?</i>
<i>Wherewithal into the heart's forest he fleeth,</i>	<i>c</i>
<i>Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,</i>	<i>d</i>
<i>And there him hideth, and not appeareth.</i>	<i>c</i>
<i>What may I do, when my master feareth,</i>	<i>c</i>
<i>But in the field with him to live and die?</i>	<i>d</i>
<i>For good is the life, ending faithfully.</i>	<i>d</i>

Here is another translation of the same poem
by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1545) (608) [2

<i>LOVE, that liveth and reigneth in my thought,</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>That built his seat within my captive breast;</i>	<i>b</i>
<i>Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought,</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.</i>	<i>b</i>
<i>She, that taught me to love, and suffer pain;</i>	<i>c</i>
<i>My doubtful hope, and eke my hot desire</i>	<i>d</i>
<i>With shamefaced cloak to shadow and restrain,</i>	<i>c</i>
<i>Her smiling grace converteth straight to ire.</i>	<i>d</i>
<i>And coward Love then to the heart apace</i>	<i>e</i>
<i>Taketh his flight; whereas he lurks, and plains</i>	<i>f</i>
<i>His purpose lost, and dare not shew his face.</i>	<i>e</i>
<i>For my Lord's guilt thus faultless bide I pains.</i>	<i>f</i>
<i>Yet from my Lord shall not my foot remove :</i>	<i>g</i>
<i>Sweet is his death, that takes his end by love.</i>	<i>g</i>

What is the most obvious (?) Difference between the Italianate and Elizabethan rhyme schemes?

What are the structural differences between the two forms? Advantages and disadvantages of each?

Why might Surrey have invented the Elizabethan form?

From Petrarch's anthology of love poems,
all English Sonnet Cycles
(Collections of short lyrics that tell a love story) derive
their structure—octave & sestet;
rhyme scheme with variations
language—paradox (e.g. freeze in fire, living death)
imagery—deer, storm-tossed ship; Cupid's arrows
themes—pride, humility, desire, desperation; sickness
situations—pursuit & rejection

The stories may change—
Sidney ends in despair; vs. Spenser ends in marriage—
but the basic ingredients remain the same.

Despite subtle differences, the problem is that they are
all using the same language to tell the same story.

Sidney—and everyone else—saw the problem:

“Truly many of such writings as come under the banner of
unresistable love, if I were a mistresse, would never
perswade mee they were in love: so coldly they applie
firie speeches, as men that had rather redde lovers
writings, and so caught up certaine swelling Phrases,
which hang together like a man that once tolde me the
winde was at Northwest and by South, because he would
be sure to name winds inough, then that in truth they feele
those passions, which easily as I thinke, may be bewraied
by that same forciblenesse or *energia*, (as the Greeks call
it) of the writer.”
(*Defense* – B 972-73)

Here is how Shakespeare represents and “solves” the problem in his *Sonnet* 130 (B 1074):

*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.*

Which kind of Sonnet (Italianate or Elizabethan) is this?
The editor of your Anthology calls this sonnet anti-Petrarchan. Why?

All of the sonnet cycles use pretty much the same images and language to tell stories about the vagaries of Desire.

How do they achieve originality? What makes them (more or less) convincing as representations of passion?

One way to be “original” is by varying the story-line. In other words, one of the clearest distinctions between the best-known cycles is to be found in the stories they tell.

Petrarch tells a story of sublimation and redemption; the poet transcends earthly love by purging his passion of all impurity.

Many English cycles—like Sidney’s, which we’ll be looking at next week—end in despair rather than transcendence, precisely because the poet-speaker is unable to master his passion.

Spenser’s cycle is distinctive because it sanctifies and celebrates a love that culminates in marriage. It ends with a Wedding Poem, *The Epithalamion* (B 907-16)

*SONG made in lieu of many ornaments,
With which my loue should duly haue bene dect,
Which cutting off through hasty accidents,
Ye would not stay your dew time to expect,
But promist both to recompens,
Be vnto her a goodly ornament,
And for short time an endlesse moniment.* (ll. 427-33)

Here is a glimpse, in *Amoretti* 68, of the process that, transforms desire into love, *eros* into *agapae*: (B 905-06)

*MOST glorious Lord of lyfe that on this day,
Didst make thy triumph ouer death and sin:
and hauing harrowd hell didst bring away,
captiuity thence captiue vs to win.
This ioyous day, deare Lord, with ioy begin,
and grant that we for whom thou didest dye
being with thy deare blood clene washt from sin,
may liue foreuer in felicity.
And that thy loue we weighing worthily,
may likewise loue thee for the same againe:
and for thy sake that all lyke deare didst buy,
with loue may one another entertayne.
So let vs loue, deare loue, lyke as we ought,
loue is the lesson which the Lord vs taught.*

So the story that Spenser tells—by very familiar means:
language—paradox (e.g. freeze in fire, living death)
imagery—beloved as deer, lover as storm-tossed ship)
themes—pride, humility, desire, desperation
situations—pursuit & rejection
ends in an earthly consummation that attempts to incarnate
Petrarchan/Platonic Love in Christian terms.

Shakespeare's Sonnets seem to defy analysis by this narrative criterion. We are not really able to say for certain what the story line is, although it is obviously complicated by a triangle: The poet (call him Will) loves a young man, who enters into a vexed relationship with the poet's mistress. When both of Will's lovers play him false, he tries to tough it out:

*So shall I live supposing thou art true,
Like a deceived husband; so love's face
May still seem love to me, though altered new—
Thy looks with me, thy heart in other place. (93: 1-4)*

But painful honesty defeats attempted self-delusion:

*How like Eve's apple doth thy beauty grow
If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show. (13-14)*

Many of the poems celebrate the permanence of true love, transcending time:

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark. . . .
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved. (116: 1-5, 13-14)*

But that affirmation is not borne out by the experience of the Sonnets, which is a story of “alteration” and betrayal. Will finally loses his lover, if not his “ever-fixed” love.

So, if transcendence is finally impossible, what is the value of a “true” love that is not fully reciprocated?

For me, the failure to achieve transcendence matters less than the painful beauty with which Shakespeare captures the melancholy of desire, the *longing* for transcendence. As in my favorite Sonnet (#73):

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

NOTES

1] Borrowed from the Web Gallery of Art at:

<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/index1.html>

2] The earliest published version of this poem appeared in *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557: actually titled *Songs and Sonnets*). Tottel (or some copier) “smoothed out” some of Surrey’s lines:

1. LOVE, that **doth live** and **reign within** in my thought,
5. **But she** that taught me love and suffer pain,
7. With shamefaced cloak to shadow and **refrain**,
10. Taketh his flight, **where** he **doth lurk** and plain
14. Sweet is **the** death, that **taketh** end by love.