Attending Shakespeare's Theater

The Globe

Attending the theater in Shakespeare's time was very different than it is now, and the Bard's own theater, the Globe, was unlike any modern one. It was probably round, or nearly so, and the only roof covered the outside galleries, so many who went to see the plays got wet in the frequent London rains. The stage jutted out into the ground floor audience, and the actors were surrounded on three sides by people who paid to see the performance.

Nearly half the theater-goers stood on the ground around the stage; they were called "groundlings", and they were a rowdy bunch, eating, talking and yelling out anything which took their fancy at the moment. People paying higher prices got seats in the galleries for their money and a roof to keep off the rain.

No one went to the theater at night. There were no electric stage lights, and the stage was right out in open sunlight in the middle of the audience. There was no scenery and very few props. There were no costumes except for which the actors had acquired for themselves, so there might be all manner of styles and periods of dress on the stage at one time.

Today no courteous theater-goer would think of walking around while a play was on, but Shakespeare's audiences, especially the groundlings, made no pretense of courtesy, and the playwright, who after all had been an actor himself, knew he'd better write a play filled with action and good stories, or he would soon lose the attention of his audience. Shakespeare's plays are action-packed with all sorts of sword play and buffoonery.

In Shakespeare's time no women or girls acted in the plays, which is probably the main reason there are many more men's parts than women's in his plays. For women to act in a play would have been a shameless and serious breach of social custom. Women were played by men; girls and young women were played by young men or boys who were carefully taught by the older actors. Not until the late seventeenth century did women and girls act. Even then, the actress was considered somewhat daring and a little suspect.

In 1613 the old Globe Theater burned to the ground after being set on fire by a spark from a cannon during a performance of Henry VIII. Throughout the world today there are many Shakespearean festivals held in theaters that resemble the Old Globe Theater.

Language of the 16th Century

Elizabethans loved the language. It was both their entertainment and their weapon. A quick wit was highly prized. Everyone from the lowliest peasant to the loftiest nobleman played with words. Elizabethans would never say in two words what could be said in six or seven.

Social standing and proper etiquette were very important during the Renaissance era. You could tell a lot about people's social standing by how they addressed one another.

Titles	King and Queen	My Liege or Your Majesty
	Prince or Princess	Your Highness
	Members of the Royal Court	Your Grace
	To Show Respect	M'Lord or M'Lady
	Craftsman	Master or Mistress Artisan
	Mature Man or Woman	Sir or Madam
	Equal birth or social standing	Gentleman or Gentlewoman
	Young boy or girl	Lad or Lass

Renaissance language was very specific. People did not use the all-purpose greeting of "Hello" or "Hi." There were different greetings depending on the time of day. Also, etiquette might call for one to ask permission before leaving. One could also express feelings or regards for another by leaving them with a blessing or good wishes.

Greetings	Good morning	Good morrow
	Afternoon greeting or parting	Good day
	Good evening	Good eve or eventide
	Good-bye	I bid you adieu
	Good-bye (I wish you well)	Fare thee well
	With your permission	By your leave
	A blessing	God save thee

The following are some insults and compliments that you might have heard in Renaissance England.

Insults	You're thick-skulled or stupid	Thou knotty-pated fool
	You're a coward	Thou art lily-livered
	You do not ever want so see this person again	Direct thy feet where thou and I henceforth may never meet
Compliments	You look pretty today	Thou art most beauteous this day
	Your voice is beautiful	Thy voice is sweeter than that of an angel
	You are dazzlingly beautiful	Thy beauty eclipses the sun

Here are some other words and phrases which might prove useful throughout your day in the village of Scarborough:

Helpful Words	Bathrooms	Privies
	Exclamation of astonishment	Huzzah
	Amazing	Wonderous
	Perhaps	Perchance
	Please	Prithee
	Come here	Come thee hither
	Truthfully	By my troth
	I'm sorry	I'm vexed
	Where are you going?	Wither goest thou?
	Where are you from?	From whence hail ye?
	What is your name?	What be thy name?
	What is the matter?	What ails thee?
	What did you say?	What sayest thou?
	What time is it?	How stands the hour?
	It is noon	'Tis midday
	You are late	Thou art behind the hour

Characteristics of the (Petrarchan) Sonnet

A fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter. An iamb is a poetic foot with a count of two syllables, where the second one is stressed. Pentameter is a poetic line with five feet: E.g. "Loving /in truth, /and fain /in verse /my love /to show."

Three stanzas -- two quatrains and a sestet. A quatrain is a stanza of four lines; a sestet is a stanza of six lines. Traditionally the first quatrain introduces the subject, the second complicates the subject, and the sestet resolves or alters the subject in some way.

A rhyme scheme of abba abba in the quatrains, and cdc dcd with some variations in the sestet. Traditionally the poet seeks to make the rhymes in the seset as different as possible from the two quatrains. (cf. Petrarch's Sonnet # 61)

Conceit: an elaborate and surprising comparison between two apparently dissimilar things.

Metaphor/ Simile: a comparison of two unlike objects or an idea and an object. A simile makes the comparison in a less direct manner, using "like" or "as." E.g. "The wind is a hammer upon the eyelids of this coastland." "The wind is *like* a hammer . . ."

Blason: a poem that proceeds detail by detail in either praise or blame of an individual, often an extended set of metaphors and/or similes that build on descriptions of the body: "I conjure thee by Rosaline's bright eyes,/ By her high forehead and her scarlet lip,/By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh."

Personification: an attribution of human qualities to an idea, an inanimate object, or an animal. E.g. "Love caught me naked to his shaft . . ." "Whereon the Sun in pity veiled his glare."

"All manner of thing shall be well/ When the tongues of flame are in-folded/ Into the crowned knot of fire/ And the fire and the rose are one." -- T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

Basic Sonnet Forms

byNelson Miller

A sonnet is fundamentally a dialectical construct which allows the poet to examine the nature and ramifications of two usually contrastive ideas, emotions, states of mind, beliefs, actions, events, images, etc., by juxtaposing the two against each other, and possibly resolving or just revealing the tensions created and operative between the two.

O. K., so much for the fancy language. Basically, in a sonnet, you show two related but differing things to the reader in order to communicate something about them. Each of the three major types of sonnets accomplishes this in a somewhat different way. There are, of course, other types of sonnets, as well, but I'll stick for now to just the basic three (Italian, Spenserian, English), with a brief look at some non-standard sonnets.

I. The Italian (or Petrarchan) Sonnet:

The basic meter of all sonnets in English is iambic, although there have been a few tetrameter and even hexameter sonnets, as well.

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

a b b a a b b a

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

c d c d c d
c d d c d c
c d e c d e
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; in actual practice, sestets are sometimes ended with couplets (Sidney's "Sonnet LXXI given below is an example of such a terminal couplet in an Italian sonnet).

The point here is that the poem 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:

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"London, 1802"
Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

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.

A very skillful poet can manipulate the placement of the *volta* for dramatic effect, although this is difficult to do well. An extreme example is this sonnet by Sir Philip Sidney, which delays the *volta* all the way to L 14:

"Sonnet LXXI"
Who will in fairest book of Nature know
How Virtue may best lodged in Beauty be,
Let him but learn of Love to read in thee,
Stella, those fair lines, which true goodness show.
There shall he find all vices' overthrow,
Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
Of reason, from whose light those night-birds fly;
That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.
And not content to be Perfection's heir
Thyself, dost strive all minds that way to move,
Who mark in thee what is in thee most fair.
So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,
As fast thy Virtue bends that love to good.
"But, ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food."

Here, in giving 13 lines to arguing why Reason makes clear to him that following Virtue is the course he should take, he seems to be heavily biasing the argument in Virtue's favor. But the *volta* powerfully undercuts the arguments of Reason in favor of Virtue by revealing that Desire isn't amenable to Reason.

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There are a number of variations which evolved over time to make it easier to write Italian sonnets in English. Most common is a change in the octave rhyming pattern from a b b a a b b a to a b b a a c c a, eliminating the need for two groups of 4 rhymes, something not always easy to come up with in English which is a rhyme-poor language. Wordsworth uses that pattern in the following sonnet, along with a terminal couplet:

"Scorn Not the Sonnet"
Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,
Mindless of its just honours; with this key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;
A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;
With it Camoens soothed an exile's grief;
The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf
Amid the cypress wtih which Dante crowned
His visionary brow: a glow-worm lamp,
It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land
To struggle through dark ways; and when a damp
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew
Soul-animating strains--alas, too few!

Another variation on the Italian form is this one, by Tennyson's older brother Charles Tennyson-Turner, who wrote 342 sonnets, many in variant forms. Here, Turner uses an a b b a c d c d e f f e f e pattern, with the *volta* delayed until the middle of L9:

"Missing the Meteors"
A hint of rain--a touch of lazy doubt--
Sent me to bedward on that prime of nights,
When the air met and burst the aerolites,
Making the men stare and the children shout:
Why did no beam from all that rout and rush
Of darting meteors, pierce my drowsed head?
Strike on the portals of my sleep? and flush
My spirit through mine eyelids, in the stead
Of that poor vapid dream? My soul was pained,
My very soul, to have slept while others woke,
While little children their delight outspoke,
And in their eyes' small chambers entertained
Far notions of the Kosmos! I mistook
The purpose of that night--it had not rained.

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II. The Spenserian Sonnet:

The Spenserian sonnet, invented by Edmund Spenser as an outgrowth of the stanza pattern he used in *The Faerie Queene* (a b a b b c b c c), has the pattern:

a b a b b c b c c d c d e e

Here, the "abab" pattern sets up distinct four-line groups, each of which develops a specific idea; however, the overlapping a, b, c, and d rhymes form the first 12 lines into a single unit with a separated final couplet. The three quatrains then develop three distinct but closely related ideas, with a different idea (or commentary) in the couplet. Interestingly, Spenser often begins L9 of his sonnets with "But" or "Yet," indicating a *volta* exactly where it would occur in the Italian sonnet; however, if one looks closely, one often finds that the "turn" here really isn't one at all, that the actual turn occurs where the rhyme pattern changes, with the couplet, thus giving a 12 and 2 line pattern very different from the Italian 8 and 6 line pattern (actual *volta* marked by italics):

"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 occasion 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,
Delights not in my mirth nor rues my smart;
But when I laugh, she mocks: and when I cry
She laughs and hardens evermore her heart.
What then can move her? If nor mirth nor moan,
She is no woman, but a senseless stone.

III. The English (or Shakespearian) Sonnet:

The English sonnet has the simplest and most flexible pattern of all sonnets, consisting of 3 quatrains of alternating rhyme and a couplet:

a b a b
c d c d
e f e f
g g

As in the Spenserian, each quatrain develops a specific idea, but one closely related to the ideas in the other quatrains.

Not only is the English sonnet the easiest in terms of its rhyme scheme, calling for only pairs of rhyming words rather than groups of 4, but it is the most flexible in terms of the placement of the *volta*. Shakespeare often places the "turn, "as in the Italian, at L9:

"Sonnet XXIX"
When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate,
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Equally, Shakespeare can delay the *volta* to the final couplet, as in this sonnet where each quatrain develops a metaphor describing the aging of the speaker, while the couplet then states the consequence--"You better love me now because soon I won't be here":

"Sonnet LXXIII"
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 take away,
Death's second self that 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 by that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

IV. The Indefinables

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There are, of course, some sonnets that don't fit any clear recognizable pattern but still certainly function as sonnets. Shelley's "Ozymandias" belongs to this category. It's rhyming pattern of a b a b a c d c e d e f e f is unique; clearly, however, there is a *volta* in L9 exactly as in an Italian sonnet:

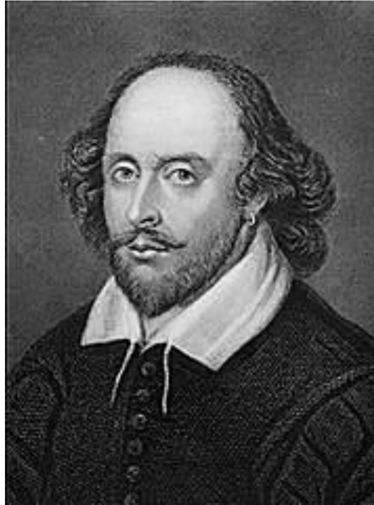
"Ozymandias"
I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, (stamped on these lifeless things,)
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Frederick Goddard Tuckerman wrote sonnets with free abandon and with virtually no regard for any kind of pattern at all, his rhymes after the first few lines falling seemingly at random, as in this sonnet from his "Sonnets, First Series," which rhymes a b b a b c a b a d e c e d, with a *volta* at L10:

"Sonnet XXVIII"
Not the round natural world, not the deep mind,
The reconcilement holds: the blue abyss
Collects it not; our arrows sink amiss
And but in Him may we our import find.
The agony to know, the grief, the bliss
Of toil, is vain and vain: clots of the sod
Gathered in heat and haste and flung behind
To blind ourselves and others, what but this
Still grasping dust and sowing toward the wind?
No more thy meaning seek, thine anguish plead,
But leave straining thought and stammering word,
Across the barren azure pass to God:
Shooting the void in silence like a bird,
A bird that shuts his wings for better speed.

One wonders if the "sod"/"God" rhyme, being six lines apart, actually works, if the reader's ear can pick it up across that distance. Still, the poem has the dialectical structure that a sonnet is supposed to have, so there is justification for in fact considering it one.

William Shakespeare



William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-on-Avon to middle-class parents. He attended grammar school, but did not go to study at a University. At the age of 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was 26. They had three children. Shakespeare left Stratford sometime after that and traveled to London where he became an actor. The popularity of new playhouses in London created a great demand for plays. Shakespeare's first play to be performed on stage was Henry VI. In 1599, he invested in a company of actors begun by James Burbage, the man who had built the first London playhouse. Together the two men built the Globe Theatre, where many important plays of the period were performed.

Shakespeare's plays included tragedies, comedies, and histories. The main character in his tragedies was always doomed to death in the end. His comedies were full of mistaken identities, women disguised as men, and other silly complications. His histories told stories of kings and great noblemen in exciting situations, such as war or rebellion. No matter what type of play he wrote, his characters and the words they spoke were very original and entertaining.

King James I loved the theatre and during his first week in London took over the patronage of Shakespeare's acting company. From then on they were known as the King's Men.

At the age of 47 Shakespeare returned to Stratford. Although he did write a few plays, the rest of his life was spent quietly with his family. Though the years some have tried to suggest that Shakespeare did not write the plays to which he was given credit; they suggest a nobleman, but it would have been someone who wished to remain anonymous. Those who knew Shakespeare never doubted he was the author. His friend and fellow playwright, Ben Johnson, wrote of him, "He was not for an age, but for all time."