



## Shakespeare's Reinvention of Poetry: The Story of His Sonnets

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Shakespeare's SONNETS

### I

Petrarch, poem 1 of *Canzoniere* (Songbook, c. 1327–68)

*Voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse il suono  
Di quei sospiri ond'io nudriva il core  
In sul mio primo giovenile errore,  
Quand' era in parte altr'uom da quel ch'i' sono;  
Del vario stile, in ch'io piango e ragiono  
Fra le vane speranze e 'l van dolore,  
Ove sia chi per prova intenda amore,  
Spero trovar pietà, non che perdono.  
Ma ben veggì' or, sì come al popol tutto  
Favola fui gran tempo: onde sovente  
Di me medesmo meco mi vergogno:  
E del mio vaneggiar vergogna è 'l frutto,  
E 'l pentirsi, e 'l conoscer chiaramente  
Che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno.*

O ye who trace through scattered verse the sound  
Of those long sighs wherewith I fed my heart  
Amid youth's errors, when in greater part  
That man unlike this present man was found;  
For the mixed strain which here I do compound  
Of empty hopes and pains that vainly start,  
Whatever soul hath truly felt love's smart,  
With pity and with pardon will abound.  
But now I see full well how long I earned  
All men's reproof; and oftentimes my soul  
Lies crushed by its own grief; and it doth seem  
For such misdeed shame is the fruitage whole,  
And wild repentance and the knowledge learned  
That worldly joy is still a short, short dream. (trans. Higginson)

### II

John Milton, "When I consider how my light is spent" (1652)

When I consider how my light is spent,  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one Talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide;  
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"  
I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent  
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed

And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:  
They also serve who only stand and wait."

### III

#### John Donne, "Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud" (1633)

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt di

### IV

#### Shakespeare, *Sonnets* (1609)

##### Sonnet 12

When I do count the clock that tells the time,  
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;  
When I behold the violet past prime,  
And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white;  
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves  
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,  
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves  
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,  
Then of thy beauty do I question make,  
That thou among the wastes of time must go,  
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake  
And die as fast as they see others grow;  
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence  
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

##### Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;

Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
     So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
     So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

#### Sonnet 34

Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,  
 And make me travel forth without my cloak,  
 To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way,  
 Hiding thy bravery in their rotten smoke?  
 'Tis not enough that through the cloud thou break,  
 To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face,  
 For no man well of such a salve can speak  
 That heals the wound and cures not the disgrace:  
 Nor can thy shame give physic to my grief;  
 Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss:  
 The offender's sorrow lends but weak relief  
 To him that bears the strong offence's cross.  
     Ah! but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds,  
     And they are rich and ransom all ill deeds.

#### 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 ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
 In me thou see'st 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 see'st the glowing of such fire  
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
 As the death-bed whereon it must expire,  
 Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.  
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

#### Sonnet 87

Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing,  
 And like enough thou knowst thy estimate.  
 The Charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;  
 My bonds in thee are all determinate.  
 For how do I hold thee but by thy granting,  
 And for that riches where is my deserving?  
 The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,  
 And so my patent back again is swerving.  
 Thy self thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,  
 Or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking,  
 So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,  
 Comes home again, on better judgement making.  
     Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter:  
     In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

**Sonnet 116**

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-fixèd mark  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
 Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom:  
 If this be error and upon me proved,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

**Sonnet 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 damasked, 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.

**Sonnet 145**

Those lips that Love's own hand did make  
 Breathed forth the sound that said "I hate"  
 To me that languished for her sake;  
 But when she saw my woeful state,  
 Straight in her heart did mercy come,  
 Chiding that tongue that ever sweet  
 Was used in giving gentle doom,  
 And taught it thus anew to greet:  
 "I hate" she altered with an end  
 That followed it as gentle day  
 Doth follow night, who, like a fiend,  
 From heaven to hell is flown away.  
 "I hate" from hate away she threw,  
 And saved my life, saying "not you."

**Sonnet 153**

Cupid laid by his brand and fell asleep,  
 A maid of Dian's this advantage found,  
 And his love-kindling fire did quickly steep  
 In a cold valley-fountain of that ground:

Which borrowed from this holy fire of Love,  
 A dateless lively heat still to endure,  
 And grew a seething bath which yet men prove,  
 Against strange maladies a sovereign cure:  
 But at my mistress' eye Love's brand new-fired,  
 The boy for trial needs would touch my breast,  
 I sick withal the help of bath desired,  
 And thither hied a sad distempered guest.  
     But found no cure, the bath for my help lies,  
     Where Cupid got new fire; my mistress' eyes.

## V

### From Shakespeare's plays

#### ***Romeo and Juliet* (1594–95)**

*Chorus.* Two households, both alike in dignity,  
 In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
 From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
 Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.  
 From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
 A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;  
 Whose misadventured piteous overthrows  
 Do with their death bury their parents' strife.  
 The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,  
 And the continuance of their parents' rage,  
 Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,  
 Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;  
 The which if you with patient ears attend,  
 What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend. (Prologue 1–14)

#### ***Love's Labour Lost* (1594–95)**

*Berowne.* O, never will I trust to speeches penned,  
 Nor to the motion of a schoolboy's tongue,  
 Nor never come in vizard to my friend,  
 Nor woo in rhyme like a blind harper's song.  
 Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise,  
 Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation,  
 Figures pedantical—these summer flies  
 Have blown me full of maggot ostentation.  
 I do forswear them, and I here protest  
 By this white glove—how white the hand, God knows!—  
 Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed  
 In russet yeas and honest kersey noes.  
 And to begin: Wench, so God help me, law,  
 My love to thee is sound, sans crack or flaw. (5.2.401–15)

#### ***A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595–97)**

*Quince.* If we offend, it is with our good will.  
 That you should think, we come not to offend,  
 But with good will. To show our simple skill,  
 That is the true beginning of our end.  
 Consider then we come but in despite.  
 We do not come as minding to contest you,  
 Our true intent is. All for your delight  
 We are not here. That you should here repent you,  
 The actors are at hand and by their show  
 You shall know all that you are like to know. (5.1.108–17)

***Much Ado About Nothing* (1598–1600)**

*Beatrice.* What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?  
 Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much?  
 Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu!  
 No glory lives behind the back of such.  
 And, Benedick, love on; I will requite thee,  
 Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand:  
 If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee  
 To bind our loves up in a holy band;  
 For others say thou dost deserve, and I  
 Believe it better than reportingly.

***As You Like It* (1598–1600)**

*Orlando.* Hang there, my verse, in witness of my love.  
 And thou, thrice-crownèd queen of night, survey  
 With thy chaste eye, from thy pale sphere above,  
 Thy huntress' name that my full life doth sway.  
 O Rosalind, these trees shall be my books,  
 And in their barks my thoughts I'll character,  
 That every eye which in this forest looks  
 Shall see thy virtue witnessed everywhere.  
 Run, run, Orlando, carve on every tree  
 The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she. (3.2.1–10)

***Henry V* (1599)**

*Chorus.* Thus far with rough and all-unable pen  
 Our bending author hath pursued the story,  
 In little room confining mighty men,  
 Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.  
 Small time, but in that small most greatly lived  
 This star of England. Fortune made his sword,  
 By which the world's best garden he achieved  
 And of it left his son imperial lord.  
 Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned King  
 Of France and England, did this king succeed,  
 Whose state so many had the managing  
 That they lost France and made his England bleed,  
 Which oft our stage hath shown. And for their sake,  
 In your fair minds let this acceptance take. (Epilogue 1–14)

## VI

## John Keats, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816)

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

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