Period English Language Poetry Forms

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The poetry composed in the Medieval and Renaissance period by and large conforms to some sort of structure, following rules of rhyme and meter, as well as subject and tone. Different forms lend themselves to different types of poems, so it is useful to familiarize yourself with a variety of them so you can choose the one that suits your subject best.

While there are many more forms than those discussed here, I have chosen to focus on those that I have found most useful for writing in English. Some forms that developed in other languages are very challenging to use in English due to the relative difficulty in finding large numbers of rhyming words.

Meter

The most common metrical structures used in period English poetry are *iambic pentameter* and *tetrameter*. An *iamb* is a "foot" containing two syllables, with the first unstressed and the second stressed (e.g. "re**view**"). Pentameter contains five such feet, while tetrameter contains four. Iambic tetrameter has a more sing-song feel than pentameter, and lends itself better to lighter subjects, while the longer lines of pentameter give more room to explore more serious or thoughtful topics. This is, of course, only a very broad guideline that may help when choosing a form, and not a hard rule.

Here is a familiar example of iambic pentameter:

> Shall **I** com**pare** thee **to** a **sum**mer's **day**?

And one in tetrameter:

> Come **live** with **me** and **be** my **love**

It is possible (especially in iambic pentameter) to vary the meter from this strict form, either from necessity or to use the change to highlight a particular word in the line, but it should be done sparingly and intentionally.

Some of the forms that will be discussed originated in other languages that do not have stressed syllables in the same way that English does. The original rules for these forms make use of counted syllables rather than feet (e.g. *octosyllabic*, *decasyllabic*), and when used in English are refitted with comparable iambic meters.

Sonnet

Perhaps the most well known poetry form is the *sonnet*. While it first appeared in Italian in the 13th century, it did not become popular in English until the 16th century. The most common form is the so-called "Shakespearean" sonnet, which consists of three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a final couplet (two-line stanza), with a rhyme scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. The first two quatrains propose and develop a question or theme. The third stanza brings a new tone or perspective to the subject, and is referred to as the *turn* or *volta* (Shakespeare's volta usually happens in the final couplet).

Here is an example of this type of sonnet:

> The sun shines down with far too great a heat
> For man or beast to stand beneath its might
> Until a wall of white cloud intercedes
> And turns the burning fire to softer light.
>
> Behind the curtain hides a blinding flame
> Too beautiful to gaze upon alone;
> A mystery that man's tongue cannot name
> Although he feels its call deep in his bones.
>
> Against all sense I strain my eyes to see
> What lies obscured within the silken mist,
> A hope within my heart that I might be
> The one who can survive its blazing kiss.
>
> To burn in beauty's fire would be worthwhile;
> Pray lift your veil and let me see your smile.

There are other variations on the sonnet. The Spenserian sonnet has a more challenging interlocking rhyme scheme of ABAB BCBC CDCD EE. The older Italian or Petrarchan sonnet has a rhyme scheme of ABBA ABBA, with a final *sestet* (six-line stanza) rhyming CDECDE, CDCCDC, or, occasionally, CDCDCD.

English Sestet

The final quatrain and couplet used in a Shakespearean sonnet may also be combined and employed as a stanza form for other poems, using the same six lines of iambic pentameter rhyming ABABCC. A notable example is "On Monsieur's Departure", attributed to Queen Elizabeth I. Here is the first verse:

> I grieve and dare not show my discontent;
> I love, and yet am forced to seem to hate;
> I do, yet dare not say I ever meant;
> I seem stark mute, but inwardly do prate.
> I am, and not; I freeze and yet am burned,
> Since from myself another self I turned.

Terza Rima

Terza rima was first used by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, and first used in English by Chaucer. It is composed of an indefinite number of *tercets* (three line stanzas) with the rhyme scheme ABA BCB CDC and so on. The end may have the structure DED E or DED EE. There is no set rhythmical structure, though iambic pentameter is most common.

This is a good form to use for long narrative works, where the number of stanzas can extend however far the story requires before reaching a final line or couplet. Here is the first section of a longer poem in this style:

> Between three seas triskelions shine bright
> Upon the crown and banners overhead,
> But in times past those flags were black and white;
>
> Meridies once ruled those lands. It's said
> That borders are but lines drawn with a pen,
> And for ambition some will seek to tread
>
> Across frontiers laid out by ancient men.
> Dire news came that Trimaris moved to war;
> She sought to take our southern lands and then
>
> Redraw the maps that had been made before.
> The knights cried out and bade King Thomas ride
> To meet the threat that could not be ignored.
>
> The Sovereign rode, he would not be defied;
> His Consort followed closely at his side.

The tercets are shown separated here for clarity. The poem would generally be written out without these breaks for ease of reading, but I find it helpful the separate them when I am writing to help keep the rhyme scheme straight.

Heroic Couplet

The *heroic couplet* is a very simple form, consisting of two rhyming lines of iambic pentameter. It was used extensively by Chaucer.

Fourteener/Ballad Meter

The *fourteener* is a line containing fourteen syllables, divided into seven iambs. These were often used in rhyming couplets. It was also common to have a *caesura* (pause) after the eighth syllable, which would lead to the development of the *ballad meter* by the latter part of the 16th century. Ballad meter rewrites the fourteener as two lines (broken at the caesura), one of tetrameter and the other of *trimeter* (six syllables in three iambs). This turns a rhyming couplet into a quatrain with a rhyme scheme of xAxA. Ballad meter is a very natural form, obviously well suited for songs as well as poems. Here is an example of fourteeners used in Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

> And when he had bewept and kist the garment which he knew,
> Receyve thou my bloud too (quoth he) and therewithal he drew
> His sworde, the which among his guttes he thurst, and by and by
> Did draw it from the bleeding wound beginning for to die,
> And cast himself upon his backe, the bloud did spin on hie
> As when a Conduite pipe is crackt, the water bursting out
> Doth shote it selfe a great way off and pierce the Ayre about.

And a ballad printed in 1586 comemmorating the execution of 14 traitors:

> Rejoyce in hart, good people all,
> Sing praise to God on hye,
> Which hath preserves us by his power
> From traitors tiranny;
> Which now have had their due desarts,
> In London lately seen,
> And Ballard was the first that died,
> For treason to our Queene.
> O praise the Lord with hart and minde,
> Sing praise with voices cleare;
> Seth traiterous crue, have had their due
> To quaile their partener's cheere.

Rondeau

The French *rondeau*, like many other forms, began as a type of song, slowly evolving until it lost its musical accompaniment. By the 15th century the "rondeau prime" had become a standard form of poetry, having the form of a cinquain (five-line stanza), a tercet, and another cinquain. The second and third stanzas are each followed by a *rentrement*, which is an unrhymed refrain composed of the first half of the first line. The rentrement is essentially a vestigial abbreviation of a full refrain that would be sung between verses. The full rhyme structure of the rondeau is therefore AABBA AABr AABBAr. One of the earliest adopters of the rondeau in English was the 16th century poet Thomas Wyatt, who wrote them using iambic tetrameter.

The challenges of the rondeau are the mutiple uses of rhymes and the reuse of the rentrement as an integral part of the last two stanzas (rather than a disconnected phrase). Here is an example:

From Cupid's bow there flies a dart,
And where it lands shall romance start:
Eternal lovers, strong and true,
Or passion's pawns, thrust deep into
The storm tossed sea without a chart.

Yet paramours are seldom smart;
They drive the horse behind the cart
And later curse each shaft that flew
From Cupid's bow.

Love is not science, but an art;
Not every hind will find her hart.
The arrows miss, or strike askew,
And when they fail it falls to you
To seek out other ways apart
From Cupid's bow.

Triolet

A relative of the rondeau, the *triolet* is a shorter, eight line poem with a very prominent refrain structure.
In English, the triolet is commonly written in iambic tetrameter. The earliest examples of English triolets are those of Patrick Cary in the 17th century. The rhyme scheme is ABaAabAB, where A and B are repetitions of the first two lines, and a and b rhyme with them.

The challenge with the triolet (aside from the compact and limiting structure) is making the refrain lines meaningful, and, if possible, altering their meaning in the subsequent repetitions. Here is an example:

The sword slipped from my rival's hand
And then I knew I'd won the day,
When at my feet the blade did land.
The sword slipped from my rival's hand,
I asked him to retrieve it and
The fight went on to end his way.
The sword slipped from my rival's hand
And then I knew I'd won the day.

Rhyme Royal

Another form useful for longer works is *rhyme royal*. This was used by Chaucer for many of his poems. It consists of any number of *septets* (seven-line stanzas) in iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme ABABBCC. These may be arranged as a tercet and two couplets (ABA BB CC) or a quatrain and a tercet (ABAB BCC). An exmaple of a rhyme royal stanza:

The new found love is bright as beaten gold,
A treasure that is easy to explain.
Of swooning maids we are so often told
And lusty lads who seek to be her swain.
    But when the poet sings the last refrain,
    We're left to wonder where our lovers went
    And how the gold of their new love was spent.