

SESTINAS, BALLADES, AND TRIOLETS:

THREE PERIOD POETRY FORMS AND HOW TO WRITE THEM

SCA Period is full of period poetry forms. Rare is the culture or subculture that didn't have some kind of generally formal form of poetry, from the haiku of Japan to the sagas of the Norse, to the sonnets of Europe. But many SCA poets and bards limit themselves to the simplest of these forms. Today we'll talk about three complex European forms: the sestina, the triolet, and the ballade, where they come from, and most importantly, how to write them.

And then we'll write.

SESTINAS

This is the most complex of the three forms we'll discuss today. Invented in 1190 by Arnaut Daniel, sestinas were written in period all over Europe, specifically Italy, Spain, Portugal, England, and France. Dante, Petrarch and Ribeiro all wrote sestinas.

A sestina is formed of six stanzas of six lines each, with an envoi (a kind of end couplet) of three lines. In period, English sestinas were decasyllabic (ten syllables per line) and instead of rhyming, there is a set of patterned end-words.

Numbering the end-words 1-6, we use this pattern:

Stanza 1: 123456

Stanza 2: 615243

Stanza 3: 364125

Stanza 4: 532614

Stanza 5: 451362

Stanza 6: 246531

Envoi: 531 or 135

The envoi also has the other end-words (246) worked in as well, in the front half of the line.

Sestinas are complex. The restrictions of the end-words force a poet to carefully construct their work to allow it to meet the challenges of the form and still be coherent. When writing your sestina, remember that your word choices are important to keep focus on the theme and narrative of the piece. Think of it like a crystalline spider web. If you break any one link, the whole thing will fall apart.

Of course, since sestinas were invented by a hard-core Troubadour, most period examples are about unrequited love, usually of a woman of a higher class than the poet, sometimes, but not always, the woman married to the poet's Patron. The stilted, forced form was supposed to be difficult to write, thus demonstrating the deep, devotional love the poet had for his unattainable mistress.

A period sestina by Edmund Spenser can be found in the August section of **The Shepheardes Calendar**, lines 151-89 (search for *Then listneth ech vnto my heauy laye,*) at <http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/august.html>.

TRIOLETS

Triolets are much simpler than sestinas to construct, although that can be deceiving. The earliest known use of the word “triolet” comes from 1486, although the form itself can be traced back to the 13th Century. Used mostly in France by poets such as Deschamps and Froissart, a triolet is formed of eight lines, with the following rhyme scheme: **ABaAabAB**, where lower case letters indicate a rhyme, but capital letters indicate a repeated line – for example:

A This is a repeated line.
B The hard part is the flow
a To make a triolet so fine.
A This is a repeated line.
a To write a good one may take time
b To make the poem really glow.
A This is a repeated line.
B The hard part is the flow.

As the poem says, the hard part is making the repeated lines seem natural and not forced. A translation of a triolet by Jean Froissart can be found at http://www.webexhibits.org/poetry/explore_obscure_triolet_examples.html.

BALLADES

The ballade is a widely used 14th and 15th century French form. Most commonly, the ballade is comprised of 28 lines of octosyllabic verse – three eight-line stanzas -- in the rhyme scheme **ababbcbC**, and a four line envoi in the rhyme scheme **bcbC**. As with the Triolet, the capital C indicates a repeated line at the end of each stanza. Some ballades are made up of 10 or 12 line stanzas, with a five or six line envoi. The envoi is a summation of the entire poem.

Another variant is the double ballade, made up of six stanzas with eight or ten lines, sometimes with an envoi, and sometimes not. This form also sometimes introduces a second repeated line as the fourth line of each stanza, and the second line of the envoi, which would result in an **abaBbcbC/bBcC** rhyming scheme. François Villon wrote a ballade supreme, with the rhyme scheme **ababbccdcD/ccdcD**, called the **Ballade des Pendus** (a translation can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballade_des_pendus). Guillaume de Machaut wrote 42 ballades set to music.

In England, Chaucer used decasyllabic ballades in his early work, notably the Monk’s Tale. Nearly as complex as sestinas, Ballades can be used to tell a more narrative story. However, the frequently recurring b rhyme makes this a difficult form for those who write in English.

These are just three of a nearly infinite number of period forms of poetry. They can be funny, sad, heroic or passionate. If it strikes your fancy, do them. Anyone can be a poet. All you have to do is write from your heart.

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Your very being is my body's breath
Across the hall I feel your gentle love
It's been near score of years for us, my heart
Just five plus two since I did beg your hand
But seven short years was when we made our hearth
A fair bright treasure that I've had to hold

It was a slight courtship, but none said hold
When we did at the altar, baited breath
did wait to hear those who would have our hearth
not joined together in our endless love
No man stood up, no person raised their hand
For they did see true love was in our hearts

When first I knew you, I ignored my heart
For you were not my jewel to have and hold
You had another gifted with your hand
I had to pause and catch another breath
I was not sure that you were mine to love
I feared that I would never have a hearth

I was alone, afire on this hearth
Unable to uphold my burning heart
I knew that you could be my only love
My fortune not to take but also hold
But you increased my fire with your breath
And further kindled passion with your hand

I could have held both yours and other's hands
I could have shared my home and shared my hearth
But life without you would be without breath
And divided, I could never keep your heart
I would not then be worthy of your hold
Deserving I should not be of your love

So you and you alone will have my love
And strike for you will surely be my hand
Zeal's vassal, my fealty you hold
And I will never lose my ardent hearth
A growing pearl, I hand to you my heart
Our love lives on amid the gathering breath.

Your love is like a living, fervent breath,
Our hands together, ever, in our hearth,
Our hearts will each the other ever hold.

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Though you will resist
I'll hold on to you
Through chances all missed
My love will be true
My love strong for you
While you heave and cry
The storms we pass through
Will end by and by.

Your flung words are grist
The mill grinds all true
I will throw no fists
Your fit is undue
Anger misconstrued
I would ask you why
But raging renewed
Will end by and by.

So I will assist
No matter to you
My words you will twist
But someday break through
And see life anew
As clouds clear the sky
Damage to undo
Will end by and by.

In days ahead new
To the stars you'll fly
And past acts taboo
Will end by and by.