

## Beginnings of the Sonnet Tradition: Important Names and Dates

**Frederick II** (son of emperor Henry VI, Hohenstaufen dynasty): born 1194; died 1250. King of Sicily from 1198; King of Germany from 1212; Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 1220; King of Jerusalem from 1225.

**Giacomo da Lentini** (active 1220-1250), a notary/property attorney in the court of Frederick II, invented the sonnet; other notaries in this Court began writing and circulating sonnets. The original versions, composed in Sicilian dialect, do not survive; but copies translated into the Tuscan dialect did survive—and started a movement that is ongoing.

**Dante Alighieri**: born c. 1265, Florence (Tuscany); 1321, dies in Ravenna (Papal State). Poet, politician; exiled in 1312 as a consequence of local and papal politics; sentenced to death by fire if he ever returns to Florence. Dante composed works in Latin and Italian, including a pivotal treatise (in Latin) on the dignity of writing eloquently in one's native tongue (vernacular), in which he also discusses a lyric genre in the Sicilian School of poetry. At the age of nine, he meets and falls in love with Beatrice Portinari, a neighbor's daughter of the same age; after meeting Beatrice again nine years later, Dante has a dream of this ideal woman, whose existence provokes a crisis in his psyche; he recounts this dream vision in a sonnet that he sends to a mentor, asking for its interpretation. In 1285, two years later, Dante marries Gemma di Manetto Donati, to whom he was betrothed at the age of twelve. Beatrice marries in 1287; she dies in 1290, at the age of twenty-four. In 1294 Dante publishes his first book, *La Vita Nuova* (The New Life), a collection of poems and prose commentary exploring courtly love, Dante's adoration of Beatrice, and a turn from concern with a suffering Self to praising the beloved's divine beauty. Dante composed his epic poem, the *Commedia* ("Divine" added later), while in exile; it is divided into three books, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*; Vergil, then Beatrice, serve as his guides.

**Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch)**: born 1304 in Arezzo; moved with family to Avignon (in southern France, home of the exiled papal court); died in Padua, Republic of Venice, 1374. Poet, diplomat, scholar of classical literature; is called the "father of Humanism"; his writings emphasize the continuity of the classical and Christian world view, making a synthesis of the two. Petrarch wrote primarily in Latin, but his most famous work, *Il Canzoniere* (Songbook), known also as the *Rime Sparse* (Scattered Rhymes), is composed in Italian: the majority of the 366 poems in this collection are sonnets, though some are in other forms (sestina; canzone; madrigal). Laura, whom Petrarch first saw on April 6, 1327 at the Church of St. Clare at Avignon, is the focus of this monumental work: Petrarch praises her virtues, celebrating his chaste love for her. These "Scattered Rhymes" are divided into two sections, Laura's death the demarcation point. Petrarch traces a developing tension in his psyche between love for an idealized female being (human creature) and love for a divine Creator. We do not know if Laura is an actual or imagined person, but the poems convey authentic feeling and thought in remarkable images and metaphors. Petrarch's earliest surviving poems concern the death of his mother. In 1341, in Rome, Petrarch was crowned Poet Laureate; after the ceremony he placed the laurel wreath on the tomb of the Apostle in St. Peter's Basilica. "*This year, 1348, I now perceive to have been the beginning of sorrow,*" he wrote in a letter. That year, 1348, Laura dies of the plague. From 1347 to 1351, the Bubonic Plague, known as the Black Death, spreads through Europe; estimated mortality between 75 million to 200 million people. This pandemic recurs in three phases. Petrarch goes to Padua in 1361, hoping to escape the plague. His Latin poem, *Ad te ipsum*, includes these lines:

Time rushes onward for the perishing world  
And round about I see the hosts of the dying,  
The young and the old; nor is there anywhere  
In all the world a refuge, or a harbor  
Where there is hope of safety. Funerals  
Where'er I turn my frightened eyes, appall;  
The temples groan with coffins, and the proud  
And the humble lie alike in lack of honor.  
The end of life presses upon my mind,  
And I recall the dear ones I have lost. . .  
The consecrated ground is all too small  
To hold the instant multitude of graves.

~Translated, from the Latin, by Ernst Hatch Wilkins

ITALIAN INTO ENGLISH: Sonnets enter the English language via translations and imitations of Petrarch (published in *Songes and Sonettes*, 1557) rendered by Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who encounter this form, now popular on the Continent, while on diplomatic missions to Italy and Spain. **Sir Thomas Wyatt**: b. 1503, Kent, England; died 1542, Dorset; poet, politician, ambassador; imprisoned without charges, released; introduces sonnet into English; imports *terza rima*, the rhyme scheme Dante invents for his *Commedia*. **Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey**: born c. 1517, Hunsdon, Hertfordshire; died 1547 (by execution), Tower Hill, Tower of London; poet, diplomat; devises a new rhyme scheme for sonnets in English, the pattern that William Shakespeare will deploy; also introduces *blank verse* into English. **Shakespeare**: b. 1564, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire; died 1616, Stratford-upon-Avon; actor, poet, playwright; favored by Queen Elizabeth & King James I; from early 1590s to 1605, he composes 154 sonnets (published in 1609).