



## **Introduction**

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

The topic for the Summer 2011 seminar was "Love and Politics in the Sonnet." This was one of a number of seminars I have offered in hopes that poetry-challenged teachers, and of course those too who love poetry, will become more comfortable with forms and literary terms that many if not all English teachers have to teach, if only to prepare their students for standardized tests.

The Fellows fully understood this objective and entered into it wholeheartedly. Almost from the beginning, they took an interest mainly in questions of form, especially the differences between the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms and the way in which the structure of each determines where the turn of thought in the argument, or *volta*, can be expected. As we read more and more sonnets from the 19th and 20th centuries they came to realize that more often than not poets actually glide over the traditional points of transition (between the octave and the sestet of a Petrarchan, for example) often by enjambling lines, and introduce their turns of thought, if there is one at all, in an unexpected place. That was of great interest to those teachers who were interested in the ways poets revise, innovate against, or subvert traditional forms. They were especially alert also to the difference between the author and the speaker of sonnets, and the parallel difference between readers such as ourselves and the implied reader frequently addressed or hinted at within the poem.

These sorts of focus somewhat deflected us from the path I had envisioned, which was to trace something like a history of sonnet themes, love and politics (and the curious ways in which they stand proxy for each other) foremost among them. These issues came in and out of our discussions, but somewhat at hazard, and always in the context of formal poetic choices. This emphasis continued unaltered as we discussed more and more sonnets by under-represented and recent poets during the second week of the seminar.

Karen Kennedy fits the sonnet into her standard course in the history of African American literature by stressing that from the beginning (Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley), poets of color have written subversively under cover of using traditional, "white" forms and writing styles. Using Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of "signifyin'," Kennedy traces a strategy that's as clear in Claude McKay as it was in Terry or Wheatley. Andrea Kulas too is concerned with the violation of conventions, and puts together a unit accordingly in which the sonnet is taught as a formal default that can then be contrasted with the departures from form in modern free verse. Kulas wants to bring out the ways in which form and its subversion almost demand each other and are engaged in constructive historical dialogue.

Two teachers will teach the sonnet as a form of expression to be mastered but also as it reflects topics in history and social studies. In his high school, Paul Landshof has the opportunity to teach both American history

and American literature in depth, and proposes to use the sonnet, from Royall Tyler to Robert Lowell, as a means of reflecting historical change, not without attending too to divergences in particular periods such as that between Whitman and the Fireside Poets. Anjali Kamat, teaching a middle-school course in world cultures, will use the sonnet both to gain insight into the western European Renaissance, especially the rise of Humanism, and also to help show how the Renaissance differs from the Middle Ages. This focus will carry her very naturally from Petrarch to Shakespeare. She will acclimatize her students to poems by beginning with work by poets like Maya Angelou.

Razan Almiladi's unit I place here as a point of transition between units concerned with history and units concerned with the conduct and betterment of students' lives. Almiladi has a lively interest in Shakespeare's sonnets, and will begin her unit in fact by teaching the "sonnet" embedded in *Romeo and Juliet* as a dialogue between the star-crossed lovers. Her theme, however (in keeping with the seminar title) is love, and the ways in which that topic not only captures the attention of adolescents but can serve as a springboard for teaching decency in interpersonal behavior.

Intisar Hamidullah, our seminar Coordinator, teaches students of middle school age with learning and behavioral disabilities, students for whom attention must be paid in equal measure to learning the skill of reading and writing and learning the skill of getting along with others. She will teach the sonnet as a reading lesson, using before, during, and after reading strategies and emphasizing throughout the social and interpersonal lessons that can be learned from studying such poems. For her second-graders, Torriann Dooley will use poetry as a topic in itself but also to teach topics such as science across the curriculum in a memorable way. Poetry has always been used as a mnemotechnical device, and will serve Dooley well in this regard. She teaches her students as much as she can about poetry and its forms but will confine herself for the most part to age-suitable poems that have conveying information as their purpose. Denise Hall wants students to find an authentic voice through reading and writing poetry. She is struck by the dullness of student prose, written according to formula as a rote exercise, and hopes that listening to and imitating to the liveliness of poets' voices, and attending in particular to the ways in which poets speak through speakers as though they were dramatic characters, will allow students to realize that writing prose as well as poetry can be an expressive medium.

Like Hall and Kamat in particular (but other teachers too hope to get this point across), Lori Wiley wants to emphasize the "concealed message" in sonnets, recognizing that part of poets' indirectness in this form results from their introduction of speakers and implied readers. Wiley's unit is organized to scaffold her middle-school students' understanding of poetry, from simple and age-suited forms upward in difficulty to the traditional sonnet, with care devoted to the learning of formal features and their purposes.

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