Shakespearean Sonnets: Iambic Pentameter and the English Sonnet Style

Shakespeare's sonnets are written predominantly in a meter called iambic pentameter, a rhyme scheme in which each sonnet line consists of ten syllables. The syllables are divided into five pairs called iambs or iambic feet. An iamb is a metrical unit made up of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. An example of an iamb would be good BYE. A line of iambic pentameter flows like this:

baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM.

Examples:

When IN / dis GRACE / with FOR / tune AND / men’s EYES
I ALL / a LONE / be WEEP / my OUT/ cast STATE (Sonnet 29)

Shall I / com PAR/ thee TO / a SUM / mer’s DAY?
Thou ART / more LOVE / ly AND / more TEM / per ATE (Sonnet 18)

Sonnet Structure:

There are fourteen lines in a Shakespearean sonnet. The first twelve lines are divided into three quatrains with four lines each. In the three quatrains the poet establishes a theme or problem and then resolves it in the final two lines, called the couplet. The rhyme scheme of the quatrains is abab cdcd efef. The couplet has the rhyme scheme gg. This sonnet structure is commonly called the English sonnet or the Shakespearean sonnet, to distinguish it from the Italian Petrarchan sonnet form which has two parts: a rhyming octave (abbaabba) and a rhyming sestet (cdcdcd).

SONNET 18

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 - syllables

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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

SONNET 29

End Rhyme Pattern

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, ------- -----A
I all alone beweep my outcast state ---------------------B
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries------------A
And look upon myself and curse my fate, ---------------------B
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, ---------------C
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd, -------D
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope, -------------C
With what I most enjoy contented least; ---------------------D
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,-----------E
Haply I think on thee, and then my state, -----------------F
Like to the lark at break of day arising ----------------E
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate; ---------F
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings-----------G
That then I scorn to change my state with kings. ---------G