

*Northern Italian*

*Sestina*

*by Lady Iselda de Narbonne*

*For Poeta Atlantiae*

*Ruby Joust VIII, AS 54*

# Summary

## Details and citations in the following pages

- A sestina in the form of Francesco Petrarca (aka “Petrarch”), who lived in northern Italy during the 14th century (**see page 2**)
- Features common to sestinas, regardless of time or region (**see page 2**):
  - Six six-line stanzas, followed by one three-line half-stanza
  - All lines must end in one of six words, that change order in each stanza according to a rigid pattern
  - Usually a complaint or lament (**see page 8**)
- Specific features of Northern Italian sestinas, particularly Petrarch’s:
  - Pronunciation, rather than spelling, determines whether end-words match between stanzas (**see page 4**)
  - Hendecasyllabic meter (**see page 5**)
    - 11-syllable lines
    - Stress on either the third or fourth syllable, and always on the tenth
  - Heavy use of natural imagery, including extended metaphors, especially of trees (in this case, rowans - **see page 9**)
  - Allusions to ancient legends or mythology (in this case, Duchess Sir Rowan Beatrice von Kampfer, who was Queen of Ansteorra by right of arms - **see page 9**)
  - A portrait of an emotional state (**see page 8**)

## Introduction

Although sestinas are believed to have been invented by the troubadours,<sup>1</sup> they were further developed in northern Italy by Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarca (aka “Petrarch”) in the late 13th century and mid 14th century, respectively. I have written a sestina in praise of the promise of Atlantian chivalry, and I have modeled it after the sestinas of Petrarch.

## Sestina form

A sestina is composed of six six-line stanzas, followed by one three-line half-stanza, or “envoi.” The defining characteristic of a sestina is that instead of traditional end-rhyme, in which certain lines end in the same sound or sounds in a predictable pattern in each stanza, each line of a sestina ends in one of six words. The order in which these end-words appear changes in each stanza, according to a strict pattern:

STANZA I	... new order ...	STANZA II	III	IV	V	VI
<i>end-word</i> 1	<b>2nd</b>	6	3	5	4	2
2	<b>4th</b>	1	6	3	5	4
3	<b>6th</b>	5	4	2	1	6
4	<b>5th</b>	2	1	6	3	5
5	<b>3rd</b>	4	2	1	6	3
6	<b>1st</b>	3	5	4	2	1

In the envoi, the words must appear two to a line, in the following order: 2/5, 4/3, 6/1. The first end word can appear anywhere in the line, while the second must end the line.

<sup>1</sup> The first recorded sestina is “*Lo ferm voler qu’el cor m’intra*” by the troubadour Arnaut Daniel. Aubrey, Elizabeth. *The Music of the Troubadours*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Graphic from Wikipedia, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sestina>>

So, following this pattern, the end-words of my poem are:

1st stanza	2nd stanza	3rd stanza	4th stanza	5th stanza	6th stanza	envoi
1 rising	6 dreaming	3 rowan	5 tremble	4 hundred	2 smother	2/5 smother/ tremble
2 smother	1 rising	6 dreaming	3 rowan	5 tremble	4 hundred	4/3 hundred/ rowan
3 rowan	5 tremble	4 hundred	2 (who)se mother	1 rising	6 dreaming	6/1 dreaming/ rising
4 hundred	2 smother	1 rising	6 dreaming	3 rowan	5 tremble	
5 tremble	4 hundred	2 smother	1 rising	6 dreaming	3 rowan	
6 dreaming	3 rowan	5 tremble	4 hundred	2 smother	1 rising	

It is this feature of the sestina that makes them so devilishly difficult to write. Once you have written the first stanza, the final words of every line in the poem are set, and whatever you have to say must conform. Many poets choose meaningful end words that pertain to their theme ahead of time, to ensure that their end words will have something to do with what they want to say. Others simply write the first stanza, and then let the rest of the poem flow from there. I made a list of about ten words that seemed to fit my theme, and then wrote my first stanza choosing from among them.

Choosing end words is, undoubtedly, the most important choice that you will make when writing a sestina, as they will guide you through writing the rest of the poem, rather than you guiding the poem. A good strategy is to choose at least one word that can be used in more than one sense, for example I use “rowan” to mean both the wood or tree, and the figure from SCA history and legend, Duchess Sir Rowan, who was Queen of Ansteorra by right of arms.

## Playing with end words

Occasionally, Petrarch takes innovative liberties with his end words. In some sestinas, rather than using the expected end word, he might use a longer word that contains the expected end word. For example, in line 37 of poem 22 of his complete *canzoniere*, he uses the word “*sotterra*” (underground) where we would expect to see “*terra*” (land).<sup>3</sup> In some sestinas, rather than using the same word, he uses a homophone. For example, in lines 8 and 23 of poem 239, in place of his usual “*l’aura*” (the breeze), he uses “Laura,” the name of his love interest who is the subject of his poetry.

What these substitutions tell us is that it is the sound of a word, and not its spelling or meaning, that determines whether it is a match for a chosen end-word. This is at least true for Petrarch’s sestinas, and thus also for mine. So, at the end of line 21 of my poem where we would expect to see the word “smother,” I have instead used “whose mother.”

## Enjambment

Enjambment occurs when a single sentence or grammatical clause spans more than one line of a poem, for example:

Held in her tiny fist, **a stick of rowan**  
**becomes rattan, she slashes at a hundred**  
**imagined foes. The leaves above her tremble**  
**in the spring breeze,** urging her on, and dreaming.

In this example from my poem, the first sentence spans two and a half lines, ending mid-way through the third line. The second sentence starts mid-way through the third line, and spans a line and a half.

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<sup>3</sup> All of Petrarch’s sestinas can be found in the original Italian here <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/sound/sestinas/>>. His complete poems in translation can be found here <<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/Petrarchhome.php>>

The syntax of Petrarch's Italian is different from modern English, resulting in long sentences full of commas and semicolons. Looking at grammatical clauses, though, we see a good deal of enjambment in his sestinas. Here is an example from poem 22:

*et non se transformasse in verde selva* and may she not be changed to green woodland  
*per uscirmi di braccia, come il giorno* issuing from my arms, as on the day  
*ch'Apollo la seguia qua giù per terra.* when Apollo pursued her down here on earth.

Sestinas in any language are full of enjambment - they practically beg for it. Because any line can only end with one of six words, a sestina without enjambment would be a series of 39 abrupt statements all ending with the same words over and over. It would be extremely repetitive. For this reason, like Petrarch, I have made extensive use of enjambment in my sestina.

## Meter

One of the features that sets northern Italian sestinas apart from other sestinas is meter. Most sestinas written in modern English are written in iambic pentameter.<sup>4</sup> The sestinas of the troubadours were syllabic - that is, there was no repeating pattern of stressed syllables, rather each line had the same number of syllables as the corresponding line in other stanzas, regardless of where the stress fell.

<i>Lo ferm voler qu'el cor m'intra</i>	8
<i>no'm pot ges becs escoissendre ni ongla</i>	11
<i>de lauzengier qui pert per mal dir s'arma;</i>	11
<i>e pus no l'aus batr'ab ram ni verja,</i>	11
<i>sivals a frau, lai on non aurai oncle,</i>	11
<i>jauzirai joi, en vergier o dins cambra.</i>	11 <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For excellent examples of sestinas in modern English, see the sestinas of Elizabeth Bishop and Ezra Pound.

<sup>5</sup> In this, the first stanza of Arnaut Daniel's first recorded sestina, we see that the first line of the stanza has eight syllables, while the rest have 11. Each stanza conforms to this same pattern. You may find the full sestina in Old Occitan with an English translation here <[http://www.trobar.org/troubadours/arnaut\\_daniel/arnaut\\_daniel\\_09.php](http://www.trobar.org/troubadours/arnaut_daniel/arnaut_daniel_09.php)>

Northern Italian sestinas, by contrast, are hendecasyllabic - that is, every line has eleven syllables. While stress patterns within these eleven syllables vary between regions, poets, and even poems, Petrarch's sestinas bear a strong stress on either the third or fourth syllable, and always on the tenth. There will be other stressed syllables as well, but the fourth or third and tenth will always be stressed. Each line will thus look like this, where "/" represents a strongly stressed syllable, and "x" represents an unstressed or less stressed syllable.

x x x / x x x x x / x or...  
 x x / x x x x x x / x

Take, for example, this line from a sestina by Petrarch: "*onde procede lagrimosa riva.*"<sup>6</sup> Counting syllables we can see that there are eleven. Because the second syllable in "*procede*" and the first in "*riva*" are stressed, the fourth and tenth syllables of this line are stressed. There are, of course, other stressed syllables - the first syllable of "*onde*," and the third of "*lagrimosa*," but because the fourth and tenth syllables of this eleven-syllable line are stressed, it conforms to the pattern of northern Italian hendecasyllables, regardless of the other stressed syllables.

In another example from the same sestina, we see "*sol con questi pensier', con altre chiome.*"<sup>7</sup> In this 11-syllable line, the first stress falls on the third syllable, rather than the fourth, but the tenth syllable is still stressed.

In some lines, a string of several monosyllabic words appear in a row, for example, "*ma poi che'l ciel accende le sue stelle.*"<sup>8</sup> In such cases, I think it's reasonable to place the stress where it naturally seems to fall, according to what's being said, which will always be on the third or fourth syllable at the beginning of a line.

In my poem I have attempted to adhere to this northern Italian stress pattern, rather than the Occitan form of the troubadours, or the iambic pentameter of English sestinas. Each of my

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<sup>6</sup> Line 22 of poem 30, "*Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro*," <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/sound/sestinas/>>

<sup>7</sup> Line 32 of poem 30, "*Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro*," <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/sound/sestinas/>>

<sup>8</sup> Line 4 of poem 22, "*A qualunque animal ch'alberga in terra*," <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/sound/sestinas/>>

lines has exactly eleven syllables. By choosing end words with two syllables that bear stress on the first syllable, I ensured that the tenth syllable of each line is always stressed. In most of my lines (see the first quoted below), the fourth syllable is stressed. As in Petrarch's sestinas, however, there are some lines that begin with several monosyllabic words where the stress falls more naturally on the third (see the second line quoted below).

x x x / x x x x x / x  
My girl believes she'll be a knight. Oh, tremble

x x / x x x x x x / x  
you who'll be there when she learns that Sir Rowan

It is the case that a line of iambic pentameter can also conform to this particular hendecasyllabic pattern. For example, "To be or not to be, that is the question"<sup>9</sup> has eleven syllables, and even conforming with Petrarch's stress pattern, the fourth and tenth syllables are stressed. I certainly could have written my poem in iambic pentameter, and that might even have been an easier approach. Iambic pentameter is so familiar and natural in Modern English that many poets write in it by accident. I decided to deliberately diverge from iambic pentameter because I enjoy the rhythmic variety that Petrarch's stress pattern allows, and because I wanted to set my poem apart from Modern English sestinas.

### **Elision**

When reading Petrarch's sestinas with the typical Modern English language practice of using vowel sounds to count syllables, you may come up with more than 11 syllables in many of his lines. In Italian poetry, however, vowels that appears next to each other are almost always elided, that is pronounced together in one syllable, even if they are not part of the same word. So, for example, "*vidi più bianca et più fredda che neve*"<sup>10</sup> has 11 syllables because "*più*," is one syllable, and "*bianca et*" is two ("*bian/cha-et*"). These adjacent vowels that must be elided are extremely common in Italian poetry, and far less common in English. You'll find this

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<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare, "Hamlet," Act III, Scene 1.

<sup>10</sup> Petrarch 80, "*Chi è fermato di menar sua vita*," <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/sound/sestinas/>>



type of elision in the last line of my poem, in which “Atlantia” appears as a three-syllable word (“At-lan-tia”), rather than a four-syllable word (“At-lan-ti-a”).

## Style

Sestinas are not terribly well suited to strident social or political commentary, and yet, as Stephanie Burt correctly notes, "The sestina has served, historically, as a complaint," the demands of its rigid form mimicking "deprivation or duress."<sup>11</sup> The most successful sestinas, both modern and ancient, and certainly all of Petrarch's, are portraits of an emotional state, painted with every-day or natural imagery. Because of the way the end words guide the writing of a sestina, I find that submitting to that guidance allows you to take a feeling from a moment in time, and expand it onto the page. It's almost as though it allows you to take the magnitude of a hidden emotion and show it to someone outside of yourself. The rigid structure created by the end words allows you to get out of your own way, stop trying to make a point, and just swim in a feeling, guided by the current of the end words, until it becomes clear to both yourself and others.

Counterintuitively, this is exactly what I needed to do in order to do this topic justice. Atlantia is one of only two kingdoms remaining in the known world that has never elevated a woman to the Order of Chivalry, and we have all read impassioned Facebook threads on the sense or injustice of this fact. Rather than make yet another argument, I wanted to show that this fact doesn't just affect Atlantia's heavy fighters, but all Atlantians in some way. I wanted to take that effect and make it clearly visible to those who might be too close to the issue to fully realize the profound, far-reaching effect it has on Atlantia's subjects.

In painting these portraits of emotional states, Petrarch employs extended natural metaphors and mythological allusions, relating them to his inner emotional turmoil. In a number of Petrarch's sestinas, for example 22 and 30, he uses a laurel tree as a metaphor for his love interest, Laura, and as a reference to Daphne, who was transformed into a laurel bough to escape pursuit by Apollo.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Burt, Stephenie (2007). "Sestina! or, The Fate of the Idea of Form." *Modern Philology*. **105** (1): 218–241.

<sup>12</sup> Petrarch 22, "*A qualunque animal ch'alberga in terra,*" 30, "*Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro.*"  
<<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/sound/sestinas/>>

In my poem, I play with natural images such as sun, clouds, and seasons to paint an emotional state, and I chose to use an allusion to SCA legend, rather than classical mythology. In keeping with Petrarch's use of trees, I use rowan as an extended metaphor, standing sometimes for literal wood, for the strength of women, or for Duchess Rowan, a knight who was Queen of Ansteorra by right of arms. I had originally intended to also highlight the women who have been Princess by right of arms (bearing in mind the many knights who have won neither crown nor coronet), but the poem guided me in a different direction. And indeed, the emotional portrait it demanded I paint is more faithful to the examples written by Petrarch than a history lesson would have been.

Earlier in my documentation, I called this a poem "in praise of the promise of Atlantian chivalry," and it is. It is not meant to be a screed against Atlantia's knights, but rather a poem proclaiming the greatness of knights to come, and the greatness that I know our current knights can lead us to.

## Example - Petrarch's poem 22

*A qualunque animale alberga in terra,  
se non se alquanti ch'anno in odio il sole,  
tempo da travagliare è quanto è 'l giorno;  
ma poi che 'l ciel accende le sue stelle,  
qual torna a casa et qual s'anida in selva  
per aver posa almeno infin a l'alba.*

*Et io, da che comincia la bella alba  
a scuoter l'ombra intorno de la terra  
svegliando gli animali in ogni selva,  
non ò mai triegua di sospir' col sole;  
pur quand'io veggio fiammeggiar le stelle  
vo lagrimando, et disïando il giorno.*

*Quando la sera scaccia il chiaro giorno,  
et le tenebre nostre altrui fanno alba,  
miro pensoso le crudeli stelle,  
che m'anno facto di sensibil terra;  
et maledico il dì ch'i' vidi 'l sole,  
che mi fa in vista un huom nudrito in selva.*

The time to labor, for every animal  
that inhabits earth, is when it is still day,  
except for those to whom the sun is hateful:  
but then when heaven sets fire to its stars,  
some turn for home and some nestle in the woods  
to find some rest before the dawn.

And I may not cease to sigh with the sun,  
from when dawn begins to scatter  
the shadows from around the Earth,  
waking the animals in every woodland:  
yet when I see the flaming of the stars  
I go weeping, and desire the day.

When the evening drives out daylight's clarity,  
and our shadow makes another's dawn,  
I gaze pensively at cruel stars,  
that have created me of sentient earth:  
and I curse the day I saw the sun,  
That makes me in aspect like a wild man of the  
woods.

(continued on next page)

*Non credo che pascesse mai per selva  
sì aspra fera, o di nocte o di giorno,  
come costei ch'i 'piango a l'ombra e al sole;  
et non mi stanca primo sonno od alba:  
ché, bench'i' sia mortal corpo di terra,  
lo mio fermo desir vien da le stelle.*

*Prima ch'i' tomi a voi, lucenti stelle,  
o torni giù ne l'amorosa selva,  
lassando il corpo che fia trita terra,  
vedess'io in lei pietà, che 'n un sol giorno  
può ristorar molt'anni, e 'nanzi l'alba  
puommi arichir dal tramontar del sole.*

*Con lei foss'io da che si parte il sole,  
et non ci vedess'altri che le stelle,  
sol una nocte, et mai non fosse l'alba;  
et non se trasformasse in verde selva  
per uscirmi di braccia, come il giorno  
ch'Apollo la seguia qua giù per terra.*

*Ma io sarò sotterra in secca selva  
e 'l giorno andrà pien di minute stelle  
prima ch'a sì dolce alba arrivi il sole.*

I do not think that any creature so has  
grazed the woods, either by night or day,  
as she, through whom I weep in sun or shade:  
and I am not wearied by first sleep or dawn:  
For though I am mortal body of this earth,  
my fixed desire comes from the stars.

Might I see pity in her, for one day,  
before I return to you, bright sars,  
Or turning back into cherished woodland,  
leave my body changed to dry earth,  
it would restore many years, and before dawn  
enrich me at the setting of the sun.

May I be with her when the sun departs,  
and seen by no one but the stars,  
for one sole night, and may there be no dawn:  
and may she not be changed to green woodland,  
issuing from my arms, as on the day  
when Apollo pursued her down here on earth.

But I will be beneath the wood's dry earth,  
and daylight will be full of little stars,  
before the sun achieves so sweet a dawn.