

The Sestina: A Poetic Meeting of Mathematics and Romance

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The sestina is an incredibly complex form of poetry originating in Occitania, modern day southern France, in the twelfth century C.E.¹ What sets it apart from other intricate poetry of the Middle Ages, such as the sonnet, is the mathematical nature of its stanzas. The sestina was truly meant to showcase the author's writing talent rather than as pure entertainment for an audience. Its complexity and density of language are indicators that the author perhaps gave little regard to how the audience would receive their work. As indicated in its name the sestina is a poem revolving around the number six. It contains six verses of six lines each and ends in a tercet, or half-stanza. The tercet contains three lines that each contain two of the six ending words arranged in pairs as 2–5, 4–3, 6–1.² To further complicate the form the same six words, in different prescribed combinations, must be used to end each line of the six stanzas as. The following chart shows how the end words are arranged by verse.³

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

For example, if each ending word of each of the first six lines is assigned a number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 the next prescribed arrangement for ending words is 1, 6, 3, 5, 4, 2 followed by 2, 1, 6, 3, 5,

¹ Tara Jayakar, "Sestina," <https://poets.org/glossary/sestina> (accessed 27 February 2021).

² Jayakar, "Sestina."

³ Jayakar, "Sestina."

⁴ Phil Wink, "Graphical representation of the algorithm for ordering the end-words in a sestina," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sestina#/media/File:Sestina_system_alt.svg (accessed 6 March 2021).

4. The labyrinth like qualities are compounded since the ending words could also rhyme. Additionally, each line of a sestina is composed in hendecasyllables, meaning eleven syllables, and was often composed in iambic pentameter. This creates great difficulty for the composer as they must extensively plan and tease out their writing to conform with the strict rules of a sestina. Yet what purpose did the sestina poem have in the 12th century? Was it purely a challenge for the writer to create art within such ridged guidelines or did it have larger themes?

The creation of the sestina poem is credited to Arnaut Daniel, a French Occitan troubadour who was active in the 12th century.⁵ Little is known about his life, but some information can be gleaned from his poetry. While historian Barbara Smythe indicates that Daniel was born into a family of minor nobility there is no real evidence that this was so.⁶ Rather there is more concrete evidence that he was a traveling jester who occasionally frequented the halls of Richard Couer de Leon.⁷ Arnaut Daniel was also a contemporary of the writer Dante who lauded him as a great romantic poet. In his surviving works Daniel does have a spark of the romantic. However, his works are dense, meticulous, and seemingly meant to obscure his thoughts from the reader. It is as if he delights in veiling his desires in thick metaphor. This density of language also seems to function as a challenge to establish if the reader is quick enough and worthy enough to understand the meaning of his poetry. In an excerpt from a sestina attributed to him, Daniel demonstrates his romantic sensibilities. But is so veiled in the strict mathematical requirements for the form that emotion seems to have been left out.

⁵ Tara Jayakar, "Sestina," <https://poets.org/glossary/sestina> (accessed 27 February 2021).

⁶ Barbara Smythe, *Trobador Poets Selections from the Poems of Eight Trobadors* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1911), 99 – 105.

⁷ Smythe, *Trobador Poets*, 99 – 105.

“Were I close to her body, not to her soul,
 were she to let me hide in her room,
 since it hurts my heart more than strike of rod
 that her servant isn't there where she enters:
 I'll be with her what flesh is to nail
 and I won't follow advice of friend or of uncle.

Not even the sister of my uncle
 did I love more or as much, by this soul,
 since, as the finger is close to the nail,
 if she pleases, I want to be to her soul:
 of me can do the love that my heart enters
 more with its will than a strong man with a frail rod.”⁸

The lines are circular and do not always adhere to the hendecasyllable structure of a typical sestina. In the excerpt Daniel uses sensual language such as body and soul. However, because of the requirement of having to use the same six ending words for every stanza the sestina becomes unwieldy. Note how the ending word of the final line of the first stanza is the same as the ending word of the first line of the second stanza. This creates a circular feel to the poem, as though it is gently unspooling for the reader, particularly when read aloud. This circuitous form also helps to illustrate exactly how cumbersome the process of writing a sestina. In the example given above not even Daniel, its creator, could fully stay within the poem's parameters. For the composer it was perhaps more of an intellectual exercise rather than purely a piece of entertainment. Especially if the sestina is compared to the flowing verse of a sonnet, with its iambic pentameter and rhyme, which was also a popular poetical form of the twelfth century. Historian Paul Fussler remarked that the sestina was of dubious expressiveness. However, he did also admit that perhaps the sestina was never meant to be translated into English and is meant to be performed

⁸ Arnaut Daniel, “The firm will that my heart enters,”
http://www.trobar.org/troubadours/arnaut_daniel/arnaut_daniel_09.php (accessed 3 March 2021).

with music in its intended French.⁹ Later sestinas from the 16th century tend to lean more toward morose or even complaining verbiage and away from romance.¹⁰ Perhaps the strict rules of writing in this form frustrated poets out of trying to convey love within such constraints.

However, Arnaut Daniel, as creator of the sestina seems to have had no such issue. His love of conveying love in his signature format even lauded him reference by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*.¹¹ Daniel's love of thick, nearly indecipherable prose does create a barrier for his audience. It can be safely said after reading excerpts of his work that though the sestina does not easily convey romantic themes those poems composed by Arnaut Daniel do. Most importantly the sestina did seem to serve a greater purpose than just an intellectual exercise. Perhaps much of the emotion the writer felt was lost when English poets began composing sestinas or when translated from French to English. In the twelfth century the sestina could have been recognized as both an intellectual exercise and as romantic prose for those who appreciated poetry in the twelfth century.

⁹ Paul Fussell, (1979). *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, (New York, New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 1979), 161.

¹⁰ Fussell, *Poetic Meter*, 161.

¹¹ Dante Alighieri, "The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio 26," <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/purgatorio/purgatorio-26/> (accessed 6 March 2021).

Long Live the Outlands: A Sestina
 Composed by Lady Helena de Eyncurt

A Stag, proud and eternal, steps from his Home
 among the sheltered forests of the Mountain.
 The light of dawn enfolds his land in Glory.
 From the vast plains, deep canyons, and hills Fair
 he watches his people lead lives of Honor.
 His heart is content, his home is the Outlands.

A cry rings out! Darkness falls on the Outlands.
 Dreadful fear creeps, slithers into every Home.
 Hardship comes but it will not steal their Honor.
 Each hearth stands forlorn, its own lonely Mountain.
 Pestilence roams, withering the people Fair.
 Oh! The sun sets. Gone are its rays of Glory.

Yet the Stags heart does not waver, the Glory
 of his vast realm is not vanished. The Outlands
 calls to him, voices thick with grief, but hearts Fair
 and full of hope. The Stag takes flight from his Home
 following their call over hill and Mountain.
 The darkness shall not take their joy or Honor.

Defending his populace is his Honor.
 Defending that honor is his Glory
 Alee! He charges, uncertain of the Mountain
 of chaos that is to come. Oh, the Outlands!
 He will join his people, fighting for their Home.
 Should the darkness cost him his life, all is Fair.

To each dwelling goes the Stag, his crown shining Fair,
 witnessing their steadfastness is an Honor.
 Even in darkness the warm light of Home
 still shines and he is dazzled by its Glory.
 Even in this time of gloom the Outlands
 shines. They find new joy in the Stag and Mountain.

Above their home, the Outlands, rises the Mountain.
Each hearth, though solitary, raise banners Fair.
The Stag rears in pride, they prevail, his Outlands!
Through pestilence and wretchedness their Honor
did not waver. They find new ways to Glory!
Within every heart the Stag finds his Home.

Long live the Outlands! The eternal Mountain
valleys, and plains their everlasting Home. Its people evermore Fair,
more chivalrous in their Honor. Never to bend or temper their Glory.