

Italian Poetry to 1600



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Jacopo Da Lentino (c1200-1250)

I have placed my heart in God's service
So that I might ascend to Heaven,
To the holy place where I have heard,
There's always laughter, joy and fun:
I'd not want to go without my Lady,
Of the clear brow, and golden hair,
Without her I could never be happy,
Separated from my Lady fair.

But I do not speak with real intent
Of committing any sin if I should say,
I'll not see her lovely movement,
Her gentle look and lovely face:
For I would be utterly content,
To find her there, glorious to my gaze.

Pier Della Vigne (1190-1249?)

Love in whom I hope and desire,
Has given me lovely you as my prize:
I wait for the sweet time and season,
When all my hopes may be realised:
Like a man at sea who hopes to move,
Spreading his sail, when he sees the breeze,
And in his hopes is ever undeceived:
I do the same, my Lady, to come to you.

Would I could come to you now, lover,
Like a secret thief and not be seen!
If Love would be so kind moreover,
It would bring such joyous luck to me.
I would speak to you so sweetly, Lady,
And say to you I have loved you long,
More sweetly than Pyramus his Thisbe.
I'll love you while I live, is all my song.

Your love it is that holds me in desire,
Brings me hope, and brings me joy too.
I care not if I must grieve and suffer
Thinking of the hour when I come to you.
For, sweet breath, if I delay too long,
I seem to die, and you appear to lose me.
So take care lest I die in hopes of you,
Take care, lovely creature, if you love me.

My Lady, I still live in hopes of you,
And now I ask again for my heart,
Though the hour itself seems late, too,
For sweet love to lead me to your heart.
I wait for the moment that will suit
To spread my sail towards you, my rose,
And reach that harbour where my heart,
Beneath your sovereignty might repose.

Carry this plaint, my little song,
To her who has my heart in her power,
And before her lay all my wrongs,
And tell her how I die of love for her.
And let her send a message to say
How I can ease this love I bear:
And if there's any wrong I've done her,
According to her worth I will repay.

Anonymous

Go now my love, goodbye now,
I know you've stayed too long, for
The morning bell has rung, and
It seems to me it's day.

Go now my love, goodbye now,
So they will not find you
In such sweet concealment
As this place where we lie.
Kiss me now, my sweetheart,
Make it a swift parting,
Look to your returning,
With lovers' loyalty,
So through constant trials
Our love may be new love
And we'll never meet with
Wicked jealousy.

Go now, my love, goodbye now,
Go now from me swiftly,
All your things are ready,
I've arranged them so.

Guido Cavalcanti (c1255-1300)

I

You have, in you, the leaves and flowers
All that shines and all that's sweet to see:
Greater than the sun your face in splendour,
Who sees you not can never worthy be.
In this world there is no creature
So pleasing or so full of beauty:
And he is led, who holds love in terror,
By your face, to desire such inwardly.

Each woman who is with you pleases me,
Through the love you show towards her:
And I pray to her, of her courtesy,
She who can do so best does you most honour.
And shows great care for your sovereignty,
For you are queen of all who are there.

II

Who is this that comes and all admire her,
And makes the air tremble with her brightness,
Brings Love with her, so that none who sees her
Has the power to speak, but each man sighs?
Oh, how she seems as she looks all about her,
Let Love himself tell. How can I describe her?
She seems a lady of such gentle aspect,
That all compared to her seem full of pride.

For her sweetness there is no description,
Every gentle virtue bows towards her,
And Beauty makes her its divinity.
Our minds could never soar so high,
Nor have we grace enough inside,
For us to ever know her perfectly.

III

Fresh new rose
Delighting Spring,
By field and stream,
Singing gaily,
I declare your rarity - to the flowers.

Let your rare gifts be
Freshly sung
By old men and young
On every journey:
And, each in its own tongue,
Let the songbirds sing
Evening and morning
The green leaves among.
Now that the time has come
Let the whole world sing
As is most fitting
Of your high merit:
Who are angelic – among creatures.

Lady, in you there sits
An angel's likeness:
Lord, how blessed
My desire is!
Your look so joyous
That goes beyond
Nature and custom's
A thing so wondrous.
The women among us
Call you a living goddess:
And I cannot express
How favoured you seem:
For who can dream – beyond Nature?

Beyond mortal nature
God made your pure beauty
So that you might be
The queen of all here:
So let your gaze from me
Not stray too far away,
And your sweet kindness
Be not cruel to me.
And if you think it wrong
That I should love you,
Don't hold me guilty too:
Love drives me, against whose course
Strength has no force – nor Measure.

IV

O, my lady, have you not seen One
Who laid his hand on my heart, when
I answered you so softly, tamely,
Because I feared his blows?
He was Love, that one who found us,
Come from far, but standing by me,
In a Syrian bowman's likeness,
Solely set to conquer others.

Drawing sighs from out your eyes,
He fired them deep into my heart,
So I was forced to flee in terror,
Till swiftly Death revealed himself
Surrounded by those sufferings
Which drown all men with sorrow.

V

Deep in thoughts of love, I came
On two young maids,
One sang: 'It rains
On us, the joy of love.'

Their faces were so calm and sweet,
With modesty and courtesy,
I said to them: 'You hold the key
Of all virtue and nobility.
Ah, young maids, do not scorn me
Because of the wound that I carry,
My heart has been dead inside me
Since I left Toulouse.'

They turned their gaze towards me so
They might see how I was wounded
And how a spirit born of sorrow
From my wound's deep centre issued.
When they saw me so destroyed,
One of them smiled and said:
'See how this man is conquered
By the power of love.'

The other filled with mercy, pity,
Made for joy, in Love's likeness,
Said: 'Your heart's wound I see
Came from eyes of such excess,
Such power, they left within, a brightness
I cannot endure:
Tell me if you recall
Those eyes in you.'

To this harsh and fearful question
That the young maid asked of me,
I said: 'In Toulouse I remember
There appeared an elegant lady,
Whom Love called la Mandetta: she
Struck me so fiercely, suddenly
To death, with her eyes, inwardly,
Through and through.'

She who had laughed at me before
Now replied most courteously:
'She, who set herself with Love's power
In your heart, gazed so fixedly
Into and through your eyes, that she
Made Love, himself, appear there.
If it's deeply that you suffer
Turn to Love.'

Go to Toulouse, my little ballad,
Enter the Gilded Church there quietly,
Ask of some lovely lady, clearly,
To take you, out of courtesy,
To her of whom I told you fully:
And if you are received,
Say to her softly: 'See,
For mercy I come to you.'

VI

As I've no hope of returning ever,
Little ballad, lightly, softly,
Go yourself, to Tuscany,
Go straight to my lady,
Who of her great courtesy
Will show you highest honour.

You will bring her news of sighs,
Filled with pain, and great with fear:
But take care to meet no eyes
Hostile to a gentle nature:
My disadvantage then for sure
You'd work, like one opposed,
And be by her reproved,
And so prove pain for me:
So that after my death there'd be,
Weeping and fresh dolour.

Little ballad, you know that death
Grips me so that life deserts me,
Know how my heart with every breath
Beats hard, as the spirits speak inside me.
So much of my Being's now undone,
I can scarcely suffer longer:
So if you would serve me further,
Take my soul along with you,
Fervently I beg of you,
As it leaps from out my heart, here.

O, little ballad, now I yield
This trembling soul to your friendship,
In its sorrow, take it with you,
To the sweet one to whom I send it.
Oh, little ballad, sighing say
To her, when you're presented:
'Your servant comes
To be with you,
He leaves one,
Who was Love's servant'

You, little weak and fearful voice
Issuing from the sad heart weeping,
Go with my soul, and this little song,
And tell her of my mind that's ruined.
You'll find a tender woman there,
Of an intellect so sweet,
That it will be delight complete
For you to leave her never.
And then, my soul, adore her,
Worthy as she is, for ever.

Lapo Gianni (c1250-1328?)

The thought my heart nourishes is sweet,
It's of a young girl that I desire,
Because of whom my spirit mounts higher,
Since Love, himself, and she did meet.

I cannot easily express
The fresh form this angel resembles
Who seems to have descended from the sky:
She seems Love's sister by her address,
And at her every gesture one marvels:
Blessed the souls she greets and passes by!
It can be said that every brightness lies
In her and every hope and joy's there too,
And every blossoming branch of virtue,
And all this is due to her great worth.

The noble intellect I have acquired
Because of the appearance of this lady,
Makes me scorn all sin and villainy,
And the sweet conversation we enjoyed
Concerning the life of love, comforts me,
When I was still new to her sovereignty.
She showed me then such courtesy,
That she did not disdain my gentle speech:
So that I wish to thank sweet Love, indeed,
Who made me fit for such honour on Earth.

Since my name is writ in the book of Love,
Tell my tale, little song, with courtesy,
When you are allowed to see my lady,
Since I am made her servant, and so prove.

Cino Da Pistoia (c1270-1337)

I

In the meadow I gaze at each white flower,
Remembering what it is that makes me
So eager to sigh that now I ask for more.
And I remember the white, the dark green,
That so created the lovely dress
With which Love was clothed,
When, with Mars and Venus watching,
The arrow that cuts deepest
Into my heart he drove:
When in the breeze the white flowers move,
I remember her lovely eyes' sweet whiteness,
For which this desire of mine cannot be less.

II

*(The Grave of his Lady Selvaggia,
on the Monte della Sambuca)*

I was on the high and blessed hill,
Where I worshipped, kissing the sacred stone,
On that rock, in weariness, bowed down,
Where Purity laid her forehead chill,
Sealing there the fount of every virtue,
When the woman of my heart, alas,
Travelled through Death's bitter pass,
She who was accounted full of beauty.

There I called to Love, in words again:
'Sweet Lord, let Death take me for his own,
Now, since in this place my heart was slain.'
But when my Lord showed only his disdain,
Still calling on my Selvaggia, I passed down:
Travelling the mountain with my voice of pain.

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321)

Guido, I wish that Lapo, you, and I,
Could be caught up by a magic spell
Placed in a ship, with the winds to fly
Over the sea as we wished, as well:
So that no tempest, no dark sky,
Might oppose us with its barrier.
Existing with but one desire
The wish would grow, to stay together.

And my lady Lagia, my lady Vanna,
And she who's found at the number thirty,
He'd set by us, that good enchanter:
Always then of love we'd banter,
And each of them be as contented
As I think we ourselves would be.

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375)

On the Death of Petrarch

Now, my dear lord, you are gone
To the region that all souls aspire
To, those whom God has so elected,
On parting from this evil world:
Now you exist where your desire
Once drew you on to see your Laura,
Now you are where my sweet Fiammetta
Sits there, in God's sight, beside her.

Now with Sennuccio, Cino, Dante
Secure in eternal peace, you live,
Seeing things here not understood.
Oh, if in this idle world I pleased you,
Draw me with you, to where, in joy,
I'd see her who first fired me with love.

Lorenzo De Medici (1449-1492)

A Song For Bacchus

How beautiful our Youth is
That's always flying by us!
Who'd be happy, let him be so:
Nothing's sure about tomorrow.

Here are Bacchus, Ariadne,
Lovely, burning for each other:
Since deceiving time must flee,
They seek their delight together.
These nymphs, and other races,
Are full of happiness forever.
Who'd be happy, let him be so:
Nothing's sure about tomorrow.

These delighted little satyrs
With their nymphs intoxicated,
Set a hundred snares now for them,
In the caves and in the bushes:
Warmed by Bacchus, all together
Dancing, leaping there forever,
Who'd be happy, let him be so:
Nothing's sure about tomorrow.

All the nymphs are more than happy
To be tricked by their satyrs,
There's no defence from loving
Except for coarse ungrateful people:
Now they're mingling together,
Playing, singing there forever.
Who'd be happy, let him be so:
Nothing's sure about tomorrow.

And that lump behind them, now
On the ass, is old Silenus:
Happy and inebriated,
Full of food and years already:
Though he can't stand to attention,
He still laughs with joy forever.
Who'd be happy, let him be so:
Nothing's sure about tomorrow.

Midas follows all the others:
Turns to gold the things he touches.
Where's the joy in owning treasure,
If it doesn't give you pleasure?
And where's the sweet taste for a man
Who only feels his thirst forever?
Who'd be happy, let him be so:
Nothing's sure about tomorrow.

Ope' your ears wide, everyone:
Let none dine on their tomorrows:
Old and young ones, all at play,
Girls and boys, be glad today,
Banish every tearful sorrow,
Make each day a holiday.
Who'd be happy, let him be so:
Nothing's sure about tomorrow.

Ladies and you youthful lovers,
Long live Bacchus: long live Love!
Everyone sing, dance and play!
Hearts, be all on fire with sweetness!
No faintness now or hint of sadness!
Whatever is to be must be:
Who'd be happy, let him be so:
Nothing's sure about tomorrow.

Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494)

I

Hear, woods, my words of sweetness
Since my nymph she will not listen.

The lovely nymph is deaf to sorrow,
Cares not for our flute's music:
So my horned flock languishes
Won't dip to drink the clear water,
Won't deign to touch the tender grass:
Grieves for a shepherd in distress.
Hear, woods, my words of sweetness.

The flock cares deeply for its shepherd:
The nymph cares nothing for her lover:
The lovely nymph with heart of stone,
Or steel rather, or even diamond:
She always flees so swiftly from me,
Like a lamb from the wolf's harshness.
Hear, woods, my words of sweetness.

Tell her, my flute, how slender beauty
Flies with the years and both together:
Tell her how time itself destroys us,
The lost years never renewing for us:
Say she must use her loveliness,
They don't last, the violets, roses.
Hear, woods, my words of sweetness.

Carry, you breezes, my sweet verses
To the ears of that nymph of mine:
Tell of the tears I weep for her,
And beg her not to be so cruel.
Tell her my life is flying by me,
Melted like the frost in sunlight.

Hear, woods, my words of sweetness
Since my nymph she will not listen.

II

I found myself, one morning, maidens,
In the middle of May in a green garden.

There were violets and lilies round me
In the green grass, hosts of fresh flowers,
Yellow and blue, and white and crimson:
I stretched out my hand to pluck them,
So I might adorn my gold locks,
Crown my beloved with a garland.
I found myself, one morning, maidens,
In the middle of May in a green garden.

But when I had culled a fold of flowers,
I saw the many-coloured roses,
I ran to them to fill my lap,
Because it was so sweet their fragrance,
So that all my heart was stirred
With sweet desire, and heavenly pleasure.
I found myself, one morning, maidens,
In the middle of May in a green garden.

I considered, but can never tell you
How lovely they were all those roses:
Some still bursting from their bud,
Some quite fresh: some slightly blown.
And Love said to me: 'Go, and gather
Those most in flower on the thorn.'
I found myself, one morning, maidens,
In the middle of May in a green garden.

When the rose unfurls its every petal,
When it is loveliest and sweetest,
Then it is fitting for a garland
Before its loveliness has vanished:
So, maidens, while it's in full flower
Let's gather the garden's lovely rose.
I found myself, one morning, maidens,
In the middle of May in a green garden.

III

Love, I thank you,
For all my pain and torment,
And I'm content – for every sorrow.

I'm content for all I've suffered,
Lord, in your lovely kingdom:
For, without merit, by your mercy,
So great a pledge you've granted me,
Since you've made me worthy,
Of a smile so blessed
My heart it's carried – to Heaven above.
I thank you, Love.

Those lovely laughing eyes
Have carried my heart to Paradise,
Where, Love, I saw how you hide
There, among your ardent fires.
O lovely shining eyes
That snatched my heart away,
How, say – does such sweet power move?
I thank you, Love.

I had grave doubts for my life:
My Lady dressed in white,
With her loving smile she saved me,
Pure, beautiful and happy,
Her hair was decked
With roses and violets,
And her eyes yet – brighter than sunlight prove.
Love, I thank you.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)

I

I have bought you, at no small cost,
A little something, that smells sweet,
Since by a scent one often knows a street.
Wherever I am, wherever you may be,
I can be clear and certain, free of doubt.
If you hide from me, I'll pardon you,
For, carrying this, always, as you pass,
Even if I were blind, I would find you.

II

Love, tell me please, if it's with my eyes
I see that beauty's truth, that I aspire to,
Or if it is within, since everywhere I gaze
I see that countenance of hers, sculpted.
You must know, you, who come with her,
To rob me of my peace, at which I blaze:
Though I'd not wish one sigh the less,
Nor would I demand a cooler fire.

'Indeed the beauty that you see is hers,
But grows in passing to a deeper place,
Sinking through mortal eyes to the soul.
There it is made pure, lovely and divine,
Like itself as the immortal part wishes.
That is the beauty set before your eyes.'

III

Lady, as one fancies there to be
A living statue, there, deep down
In the harsh alpine stone,
Slowly found as the stone is cut away:
So our own skin conceals
Beneath its crude overlay,
Tough and yet un-worked, fit things
For the soul that trembles still,
Things you alone can bring
From out my deepest being,
For in me there's neither strength nor will.

IV

The best of sculptors has not one idea
The un-worked marble does not hold
Inside itself: the hand alone attains it
That is commanded so by the intellect.
The evil I shun, and the good I hope for,
Are concealed so, in you, high, sweet,
Divine Lady: and so as to cause my death
My art itself opposes the desired effect.

Love then is not to blame, nor your beauty,
Harshness, nor fortune, nor great disdain,
For my mischance, nor destiny, nor fate,
While you have death and pity in your heart
Together, and my wretched, burning, mind
Has no way to draw forth anything but death.

Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547)

I live upon this wretched solitary cliff
Like a bird of sorrow that shuns green
Branches and clear water: and withdraw
From my worldly loves, and my very self,
So my thoughts may fly swiftly to that sun
I worship and adore. And though they fail
To spread their wings as I wish, yet if I call
Still they fly back from other paths to this.

And in the instant that they reach the place,
Where I send them, ardent, happy, their brief joy
Surpasses every delight on Earth by far.
And if they could but re-create his noble
Form, just as the burning mind desires,
I might own my portion of perfect good.

Gaspara Stampa (1523-1554)

I

I swear to you, Love, by your arrows,
And by your powerful holy flame,
I care not if by one I'm maimed,
My heart burned, wasted by the other:
However far through times past or coming,
There never was nor will be woman
Whomever of them you wish to name,
Could know such sharpness, such devouring:

For there's a virtue born from suffering,
That dims and conquers the sense of pain,
So that it's barely felt, seems scarcely hurting.
No! This, that torments soul and body again,
This is the real fear presaging my dying:
What if my fire be only straw and flame?

II

Every planet above, and every star,
Gave my lord their powers at his birth:
Each one gave him of their special worth,
To make a single perfect mortal here.
Saturn gave him depths of understanding,
Jupiter for fine actions gave desire,
Mars a greater skill than most in warfare,
Phoebus, elegance and wit in speaking.

Venus beauty too, and gentleness,
Mercury eloquence, but then the moon
Made him too cold for me, in iciness.
Each of these graces, each rare boon,
Make me burn for his fierce brightness,
And yet he freezes, through that one alone.

III

O Night, brighter, more blessed for me,
Than the most blessed, the clearest day,
Night worthy of the finest spirits' praise,
The very choicest wits' and not mine only:
You alone have been one true to me,
Minister to my joys: you have made here
All life's bitterness seem so sweet, so dear,
Giving me to the arms of him who binds me.

All that was left for me was to become
Alcmena the fortunate, for whom the light
Delayed its return far longer than its wont,
Yet I could never speak so well, bright Night,
Of you, that all the power of my song
Would not fail before its theme's great might.

IV

O all my labours scattered uselessly,
O, all my useless scattered sighs,
O loyalty, that never, O living fire,
Chilled or burned others so, if I see truly,
O paper marked, to be marked, in vain,
In praise of those loved and ardent eyes,
O those hopes ministering to desires,
That their worthiest prize should claim,

All, all, in a moment, gathered by the breeze,
Since I have heard my impious lord
With my own ears, himself speak free,
Saying when near that he thinks of me,
And yet in leaving, in an instant leaves,
Of all my love, his every memory.

Torquato Tasso (1544-1595)

I

Life of my life, you seem to me
Like some pallid olive tree
Or the faded rose I see:
Nor do you lack beauty,
But pleasing in every way to me,
In shyness or in flattery,
Whether you follow me or flee,
Consume, destroy me softly.

II

O you, far colder, whiter
Than she who makes less fair
The stars with shining there:
Her purest silver cannot dim
Nor any cloud, or rain or wind,
Your sweet brightness, lovely eyes.
Would you but turn to me, with delight,
I should be happy, and my life a dream.

III

Hedge, that divides the lovely
Garden, and myself from me,
Never in you so fair a rose I see
As she who is my lady,
Loving, sweet and holy:
Who as I stretch my hand to you
Presses it, so softly, too.

IV

What weeping, or what dewfall,
Whose then were those tears,
Flung from night's cloak, I saw,
And the white face of the stars?
Why was the white moon sowing
A pure cloud's crystal mass
In the lap of fresh new grass?
Why were the winds heard, blowing,
Through the dark air, round and round,
Till dawn, with mournful sound?
Were they perhaps the strife
Of your going, life of my life?

V

I love you only because you're lovely,
And my star commands me,
Not, my sweet good, through hope I'll gain
Anything but pain.

And if you showed pity at any time
For these eyes of mine,
I'd expect nothing for all my crying
But still more crying.

Nor, though you hear the ardent sighs
That I scatter to the winds, will my
Heart hope anything from you will flow
Other than sorrow.

Let me only love, and look at you,
And then let me sigh for you,
Since pain, sorrow, crying are the gifts I see,
For all my loyalty.

VI

Once we were happy, I
Loving and beloved,
You loved and loving, sweetly moved.
Then you became the enemy
Of love, and I to disdain
Found youthful passion change.
Disdain demands I speak,
Disdain, that in my breast
Keeps the shame of my neglected offering fresh:
And from your laurel
Tears the leaves, now dry, once beautiful.

VII

To the Duchess of Ferrara

Royal bride, see the time advance
That calls true lovers to the dance,
To charm the clear and frosty nights,
Beneath the soft and pleasing lights.
Now a young girl dares to hear,
Love's secret pain, in her chaste ear,
And leaves her lover uncertain, gently,
At war, with life and death, sweetly.
Great palaces, painted ceilings high,
Echo with song: only I weeping make
This dark prison ring. And is this then
Your loyalty? This the great gift, that I
So longed for? Ah, then you call a grave,
And prison, your pity, and your recompense?

