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MORE RIMING COUPLETS PLEASE!

It is without a doubt that the *riming couplet* has been a useful construct in formal (classical) poetry. It has been altered and adapted over the centuries, but today there is a tendency not to give a great deal of praise or time to this once popular form.

Of course there is still the push from the *vers libre*¹ tribe that the formalist we may say, are no longer required and should be put out to pasture. The most common reasons are that the verse is archaic and unoriginal.

Regardless of ill-informed comments, it is with great confidence that we can say the perfection of the *riming couplet* (also referred to as the *heroic couplet*) finished with Dryden and Pope. The two were not identical in their method of composition, but Pope was inspired by the work of Dryden and so learnt a great deal to perfect his own style.

Dryden experimented with the use of riming couplets in drama and mostly with great success. For example, *Tyrannick Love*. It would be and should be an interesting exercise to examine why there *was* such success.

There are two aspects of the riming (heroic) couplet that come into question: (1) the iambic pentameter and (2) the use of rime.

The *iambic pentameter* verse was a sort of *new breath* to the English verse and quickly became

the most popular form to write in. Anybody who was anybody used it, but not all with the same skill. There were a number of advantages. There is just the right mouthful of, let's say syllables to be spoken in a single verse. It is not taxing on the reader or listener when read aloud. (Silent reading is a pointless activity for verse.) It offers a rich possibility of enjambment and a number of verses can be made to successfully follow each other in logical sense units. The form closely follows our speech patterns. The use of iambs and trochee (iambic reversal) allow for the natural speech stress and also metrical accent. Even though the lamb itself is said to be non-stressed/stressed or short/long, it can handle metrical promotion and demotion very well.

Although we talk about the iambic pentameter and its sequencing of five iambs, other metrical feet may be substituted for the iamb without disrupting the rhythm. This type of verse is often termed *loose iambic pentameter*. The iambic rhythm is not violated, but not all the feet are iambs. These substitutions became popular in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, and that popularity has continued today.

The fact remains that iambic pentameter is a verse form that offers a great deal of potential to those poets wishing to push the limits of the iambic meter. It can be used in a variety of ways for expression and mood and/or speed of reading.

The greater objection is the rime. Many poets today have a total aversion to rime in any form.

Sure, people do not converse in rime (unless for an appropriate reason), and some believe this goes against the logic of it making any appreciable sense. To naturally speak in riming

¹ It would do this hoodwinked herd well to read T. S. Eliot's article: *Reflections on Vers Libre* and realize how much freedom they really (do not) have. His thoughts and observations are as relevant today as they were when he wrote them.

couplets in every day conversation would certainly border on the comical.

Yet we must pass on the comical and look at the skill that is required to not only rime, but to make sense. It has been on more than one occasion that we have been able to predict the rime of a verse. In most instances, this is not the type of rime we want as this makes the verses more of a game for the reader and so the poem loses all meaning, serious or not.

We must accept that for the reader, the unexpected rime is not always possible. Yet whenever they do occur, they produce a feeling of gratification and wonder, especially for the poet.

Rime is not an expectation of great poetry, cf. *blank verse*. However, it does have a pleasant appeal to it, if it is done properly. We may question that if the rime continually occurs in pairs, there is the chance of monotony setting in. Common rimes are at fault here. I call them common because you will meet them all the time. English may not be the most eloquent language for riming, but we can certainly try to step away from being common or ordinary.

Whereas full-rime is generally preferred, we will find that the occasional slant-rime will be welcome and add to the variation. The rime should not be so *slanted* as to have no familiarity in the rime.

Penultimate riming can be pleasant and an added change, but should not be used continually, thus creating a sequence of feminine verses. We should strive for rime on the ultimate syllable where possible.

A creative use in common rimes will also be appreciated. Those like night, fight, sight, me or see, be and so forth should not litter verses.

The combination of the two (iambic pentameter and rime) creates a very closed unit. Traditionally, the rimed couplet (or heroic couplet) would be such a closed unit or *closed couplet*. In other words, the closed couplet was essentially a single thought. The skill was then to combine all these single thoughts to form the whole. Pope and Dryden come to mind with their expertise.

The appearance of *enjambment* has worked its way into the riming couplet allowing the poet to exceed the two verse restriction. The purists would not appreciate this variation. The only

acceptable use of enjambment with riming couplets is to carry the first couplet onto the second. It is possible that a couplet is undergoing enjambment only to the first verse of the next couplet. Many would not consider this to be acceptable, but in some circumstances it can be made to work to the poet's advantage. It is not advised to have the enjambment over too many couplets, because this can create a very awkward and strained sentence or paragraph. In most cases this results in grammatical errors.

There are other avenues or variations open to the poet which at first glance seem to go against the idea of a couplet. The first of these is what is known as a *triple* or *triplet*. Admittedly this is very odd to see with couplets and has limited advantages in itself. The triplet should never be seen as merely a third riming verse. To do so goes against its real purpose. Its only purpose is to allow the poet an extra verse to help make an important point. It should also be noted that the triplet should be used sparingly.

The common triplet is three verses of iambic pentameter with the same rime. The only variation to this is that the third verse may be iambic hexameter which although, not strictly correct is often called an *Alexandrine*. Although I consider this to be a rather obnoxious thing to do to the reader but a skillful poet can make it work well.

Even though the triplets are signaled by a right-curved fence, the somewhat sudden appearance of the hexameter verse is enough to disrupt the reader's sense of rhythm. Dryden made use of the hexameter, but Pope did not like it although on rare occasions he did use it to great effect.

Some poets have made further variations such as hexameter couplets or a triplet of hexameter verses. They may well be variations but they should be rarely used as they only do damage to the work. Naturally the skill that is required is the ability to have the couplets follow each other in a manner that comes as natural. Without this skill the reading of the couplets can become disjointed and jerky in their reading. This will not impart a satisfactory reading experience. The rhythm and general flow of riming couplets is of prime importance. It is not simply a matter of having two riming verses in iambic pentameter.

Apart from these apparent faults of riming couplets, they still have a modern appeal, and can be used successfully and are very effective in

modern verse. The major advantage is that it stands out as something different. It takes a definite skill to create a cohesive piece using riming couplets and to a point this can be more difficult than other traditional form.

Although heavily criticized in some circles, I believe that the reader is often taken in by the witty use and continuance as in conversation. This in itself is not an easy thing to do. Poets are often taken aback by the simplicity of the form, but do not take the time to read the masters and perhaps steal their secrets.

The short of it is that there is nothing simple, childish or archaic about riming couplets. There is only need of study and practice to improve one's skill in both iambic pentameter and rime.

You will be surprised at how powerful, effective and pleasant riming couplets can be. You have only to ignore the negativity directed toward this form of verse and try your hand at it.

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