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The Function of the couplet in English poetry: A Case Study of the Renaissance Patterns

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Abstract

The couplet is a pair of successive lines of verse rhyming together and of the same length. It is among the oldest and most elementary forms of metrical English poetry and one of the most widely used in all types of popular verse.

Critics argued whether the couplet should be regarded as stanza proper, but most of them agreed to the fact that it is too short to be classified as a stanza. Nonetheless, the couplet remains the first distance of one cadence involving the briefest possible interval between rhymes.

Whatever the fact may be, the couplet remains the oldest, simplest and most basic form of all stanzas: it is a major form for extended poetic compositions, an important part in more complex strophic forms, and a vital constituent of any poetry aiming at compactness.

This paper sheds the light on the couplet, its emergence, forms and functions in English poetry in general and in renaissance poetry in particular. The renaissance was the time when the basic features of English poetry began to formulate and take shape, a time when poets utilized it and twisted it to their best need. The Renaissance poets (and critics) were the *avant-garde* who laid down the corner stone for all the stanzaic patterns of English poetry.

What is a couplet?

The couplet is "a unit consisting of a pair of lines of the same length, linked by rhyme".[1] It is among the oldest and most elementary forms of metrical English poetry and one of the most widely used in all types of popular verse. Couplets can be traced as far as 12th and 13th centuries, when the form, in the octosyllabic measure, was brought from France and practised. Schipper says that Anglo-Norman poets like Gaimar, Wace, Brnoit were the first to bring the form into England.[2]

The Renaissance critic and theorist George Puttenham excludes the couplet from his category of the "stanza proper". He believes that the couplet falls short of being classified as a stanza. However, he speaks of the proportion of the couplet as the first distance of one cadence, that is, as involving the briefest possible interval between rhymes:

And the first distance for the most part goeth all by distick⁽¹⁾ or couples of verses agreeing in one cadence, and do pass so speedily away and so often return again as their turn is never lost, nor out of the ear, one couple supplying another so ... suddenly. This proportion, Puttenham adds, is "the most vulgar [native] proportion of distance or situation employed by Chaucer in his Canterbury tales and John Gower in all his works".[3]

To Samuel Daniel, couplets are dull and boring. He says, "I must confess that to mine own ear those continual cadences of couplets used in long and continued poems are very tiresome and displeasing".[4] The reason, according to Daniel, is because "they [couplets] run on with a sound of one nature and a kind of certainty which stuffs the delight rather than entertains it".[4]

To Ben Jonson, however, the case is the contrary: he detests all other "Rimes" but "Couplets". In his conversation with William Drummond, he tells the Scottish poet that couplets are "the bravest sort of verses, especially when they are broken like hexameters."[5] Jonson regards cross-rhyme and intricate stanzas as 'forced' forms of poetry; whereas couplets are easy and straightforward.

Whatever the fact may be, the couplet remains the oldest, simplest and most basic form of all stanzas: it is a major form for extended poetic compositions, an important part in more complex strophic forms, and a vital constituent of any poetry aiming at compactness. Many epigrams (such as those of John Donne, Ben Jonson, and Robert Herrick) consist of a single couplet.

When the two lines of the couplet are of the same length, they are 'equal couplets'; when the syllabic length is different, they are 'unequal couplets'. Similarly, when the second line in a couplet is end-stopped (strong punctuation) and the first line depends (syntactically) on it, then the form is normally called 'closed couplets'. But when they are enjambed, they become 'open couplets'. Couplets have normally been composed either of 'equal' or 'unequal' length, that is isometric or heterometric pair of lines.

The Isometric Measures:

The most important form of the couplet is the isometric one, i.e. where the syllabic length of the verses is equal. It is this version of the couplet that is most widely known to people; most extensively practised by poets. The number of syllables in the line is undefined: poets used the measure that suited their subject matter, but perhaps in lines no longer than sixteen syllables, as Webbe claims;[4] and in lines no shorter than two syllables, as Puttenham

¹ Distich and couplet are in English different terms for the same thing, a pair of lines rhyming together. A distinction can be made. 'Couplets' may be a better term for continuous verse, 'distiches' for detached units of verse. Rhyme is a necessary bond in English isometric verse. In heterometric verse rhyme may be redundant: English versions of the Latin elegiac couplet (as for example *Old Arcadia 11*) are intelligible as verse.

claims.[3] The couplets of 16 syllables are rare as Webbe indicates; whenever employed, the lines were normally divided into two. And Puttenham says that two syllabic couplets are 'not usual' forms in English.

Next to the longest measure (16 syllables) comes a more popular form called the septenary or fourteenner, where each of the verses consists of 14 syllables (7 feet). Webbe says that this was an approved pattern—'most accustomed of all other [measures]'- during the Elizabethan time; and was especially used for translating Greek and Latin poetry.[4] The measure included a pause or caesura which was normally placed after the first eight syllables. It is the metre of, for example, Chapman's *Iliad*. It offers an equivalent of the Greco-Roman hexameter. Edmund Spenser was among the first to write fourteenners in quatrains. He used the measure, divided, in the arguments preceding the cantoes in his *Fairie Queene*. This was imitated by Michael Drayton in *The Shepherd's Garland*; and also by William Browne in *The Shepherd's Pipe*.⁽²⁾

It is also the case that the measure had been in use in England since the 13th century; covering a variety of subjects including serious and narrative ones.[6] This means that the 14-syllabic lines existed in England not because of classical verse as much as because older English alliterative poetry permitted the use of very long lines.[6] Whatever the source of the fourteenner, this long and complicated measure soon fell out of fashion, perhaps because of its length which often endangered the benefit of the rhythm. The fourteenner, hence, gradually gave way to the iambic decasyllabic which immediately became the standard (long) line in English poetry.

But committing themselves to the decasyllabic couplet exclusively, some English poets used another form of couplet, the alexandrine couplet. J. Schipper praises the alexandrine because it 'runs more smoothly than the Septenary'; it consists of twelve syllables with a caesura after the sixth syllable.[7]

In sixteenth century France the alexandrine seems to have been the standard measure (the heroic line) in French poetry and drama (and the most popular measure in seventeenth century French and German drama).[8] In England, however, the measure was used most notably by Drayton (perhaps under French influence), who used it as the formal measure in a whole book, *The Poly-Olbion*.

The alexandrine line on the other hand was very common during the Renaissance period. It has been in use in England since the 13th century, not as an exclusive measure in poems (and plays), but occurring, mainly, as the first member in the 'poulter's measure', and occasionally in interrupted sequences. The alexandrine was utilized most importantly by Spenser who

² Browne's fourteenners (in the arguments preceding the eclogue in *The Shepherd's Pipe*) do rhyme and become of the (a8b6a8b6) variables--the measure of the common ballad.

used the line to conclude his Spenserian stanza; which came to be regarded as characteristic feature of this nine-lined unit.

The Heroic Couplet:[8].⁽³⁾

The decasyllabic line is one of the most important measures in English verse, known as the 'heroic measure' and 'the iambic pentameter.' To Puttenham this measure, 'of ten syllables', is 'very stately and Heroical, and must have [its] Caesura fall upon the fourth syllable,' that is just off mid line pause.[3]. Samuel Daniel described it as 'our old accustomed measure of five feet'.[4] It is a measure not just widely popular, but highly rated.

The origin of the pattern is unknown, but it may have been first developed by Chaucer under French influence.[9] In fact Chaucer can be considered as the measure's first populariser when he used it for narrative purposes in *The Canterbury Tales*. After Chaucer the mode soon spread among the poet's followers despite Puttenham's calling his work a 'merie tale' of a 'riding rime'.[3]

The heroic couplet, as such, began to prove its importance and to reveal a living and developing tradition. Virtually, there was no English poet of the Renaissance who did not use the form at least for some of his poetry, including poets like Thomas Campion who, by then, had realized that the measure is the staple of English metres.[10].⁽⁴⁾ A bulk of poets including Skelton (in his aureate work), Wyatt, and Surrey followed in the use the metre. As well as Chaucerian effects, the influence of the French decasyllabic line is also tangible here.[11] It is for earlier Tudor poets a line difficult to manage.

Most Renaissance poets still encountered some difficulties in composing their decasyllabic lines; some of their verses were regarded as 'rough' lines. There is some indication that both syllabification and accentuation were either 'wrenched' or, at the time, naturally so pronounced.[12]The English language by this time (early sixteenth century) was somewhat unstable; in consequence, the syllabification of words was affected.[11]

Thus, in trying to render classical texts closely into English pentameter, some poets (like Surrey) faced many metrical irregularities resulting from the metrical traditions these poets inherited, which maintained a sharp distinction between lyric and non lyric poetry.[11] So, these poets (Surrey and others) seem to have had in mind an iambic decasyllabic as a basic measure for a large proportion of their verse, but at the same time the metrical tradition he/they inherited for serious verse did not include the iambic decasyllabic as a popular metrical type.

³ The decasyllabic line has been extensively used since the late 13th century, but the name 'heroic' was derived from its use in the 'heroic' plays in the late seventeenth century.

⁴ Campion was one of those who wanted an adaptation of classical measures into English verse. He realized, however, that the decasyllabic is more natural to the English language and used the 'heroic line' for the classical dactylic hexameter: he too would spoil Ovid's joke.

When Spenser composed his *Shepherds Calendar*, he tried to adapt his versification to the station of the rustic people who appeared in his *Eclogues*. According to E.K.'s preface he was trying to achieve a manner like that of the ancients, just like any other poet of the era, who was looking to establish older tradition of the English verse.[11] Such were the tradition Elizabethan poets inherited; such were the metrical difficulties these poets encountered.

But despite all troubles, these poets, by and by, managed to establish the decasyllabic line tradition in England; and the full tide of the heroic couplet was yet to come. William Piper asserts that another group of poets, in turn, contributed to the tradition by elaborating more extensively on ancient conventions. He stresses that it was because of,

...the efforts of many Elizabethan poets (among them Christopher Marlowe, Sir John Harrington, Michael Drayton, Thomas Heywood, Joseph Hall, and, of course Donne and Jonson) to reproduce in English the effects of the Latin elegiac distich, especially as it had been employed by Ovid in his *Amores* and *Heroides* and by Martial in his *Epigrammaton*. The English form in which they all found ... that these Latin effects could be transported was the decasyllabic couplet.[10]

The majority of these poets soon realized the analogy between their own rhyming (heroic) couplets and the Latin elegiac distich as was practised by the classical poets Ovid, Catullus and Martial. Piper also indicates that these lines best suit erotic topics; but later poets such as Catullus and Martial showed that it was applicable to satirical themes as well.[10]

Ovid's first line of this elegiac couplet conforms to the alexandrine practised by earlier classical poets (Virgil and Lucretius, but his form as a whole was subject to a hierarchy of pauses and rhetorical tricks.[10].⁽⁵⁾ This of course affected the English couplet, but poets here were more committed to isometric (especially decasyllabic) couplet. Ovidian rhetorical techniques and the manipulation of pauses gave the 'heroic' 'closed couplet' stability and movement, unity and diversity, as well as order and variety.[10]

These divisions in the couplet structure show the flexibility, variety and built-in qualities of the tradition (of the couplet); yet, they were severe rules for some poets. But the pauses did not divide the couplet into broken and loose fragments; on the contrary, they always showed the forward impulse between the aspects of the one couplet and related every couplet to those neighbouring.[10] By this, the couplet became indeed the 'bravest' form of metrical composition.[5].⁽⁶⁾

⁵ In the Latin distich the strongest pause was at the close of the distich, the second strongest at the end of the first line, the third strongest at the middle of each line. The rhetorics depended on inversion, balance, and parallelism.

⁶ With Jonson normally a strong pause divided the lines. A stronger pause also existed at the end of the first verse; but the strongest pause was dedicated to the close of the couplet in imitation of the classical line.

The decasyllabic closed couplet became basically a medium for public discourse: poets began to define issues, build arguments, make personal conversations, polite addresses or political oratory. Of course this order existed in Ovid and Martial, but with translations, adaptations and imitations, it was revived (with some variety) in the verse of our Renaissance poets.[10]

The septenary and even the alexandrine seemed to be too long; in contrast, the octosyllabic too short. The decasyllabic would appear the ideal measure. In fact the measure has ever been a favourite one in English adapted for every topic, but with some preference for 'greater' lyric and epic poetry. Heroic couplets were also used in prologues and epilogues of some plays.

The decasyllabic measure was normally regarded as less monotonous than the other metres. However, to prevent any such possibility, many poets linked three lines together by one and same rhyme (triplet), whereby the regular sequence of couplets was then interrupted wherever they pleased. These triplets were also used to stress a particular passage or highlight a certain idea. Johnson credits John Dryden, not with inventing but establishing this feature of English heroic verse. It is used by Chapman in his translation of Homer, by Hall in his *Satires*, and as early as by Phaer in translation of Virgil (1558).[13]

So, the iambic decasyllabic ('pentameter') was established after being subjected to a series of refinements;[10] only then, the full scale of using the form began in Elizabethan England. The use of rhyming couplets now 'endowed the body of the English decasyllabic line with a rhythmic freedom and flexibility lacking in the classical pentameter line.'[10] Thus English poets developed the (closed) couplet (which began as an imitation of a Latin form) into a device of major poetic composition.

According to Piper,[10] the production of couplets seems to have undergone different stages, developing from its 'romance' status; then becoming more elegiac, till it reached its more complex formula where it can stand as a complete unit of its own.[5].⁽⁷⁾ It started with translation and

⁷ The development of the heroic couplet is directly linked to the creation and perfection of blank verse in the sixteenth century. Blank verse is 'English Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin...' as Milton says in the prefatory comment to the verse of *The Paradise Lost*, 1674. It was first used by Earl of Surrey (in his translation of Virgil). The form was also employed in Italy as unrhymed hendecasyllables, supposedly equivalent to classical hexameters. Blank verse may be the result of 'Tudor experiments in writing an unrhymed line that adhered to the native tradition of accentual-syllabic poetry', or simply is a modification of the heroic couplet (which was first used by Chaucer) by simply omitting the rhyme at the end. Like the couplet, blank verse is most suitable for narrative and epic verse. Before Milton, blank verse was standardly used by Elizabethan dramatists, 'our best English Tragedies' as Milton also remarks. Rhyming couplets were very often used to vary the metre, to indicate a peak of a dramatic action or as a conclusion of certain scenes. As an isolated single line, blank verse would hardly give any effect more than a line of prose, but the effect becomes very clear (through repetition) when it is used as unit in a verse paragraph

narration (used by Marlowe in translating Ovid's *Amores*, and composing his *Hero and Leander*). The second phase was marked by Jonson and Donne. The third mode which could be added here is the one practised by later poets as Edmund Waller and Sir John Denham.

A master poet like Jonson made a compromise between Horatian style (conversational, lucid, terse and quiet), and the styles of Martial (witty) and Juvenal (exalted and orational satire). The satiric Donne also had his role; his style was epigrammatic, oratorical, witty, expostulatory; in consequence, conversational. He used couplets and sets of couplets to define separate epigrams, contain certain figures of speech as well as contriving rhetorical antitheses. It was Donne who in this sense inspired the Augustan age, most importantly, Alexander Pope.

After Jonson there was a group of poets influenced by him, including Denham and Waller; who acquired their couplets from such poets as George Sandys, Sir John Beaumont, and Lucius Cary. All of these poets played their role in handing over the couplet tradition to its new master John Dryden. Denham was a closed couplet virtuoso; Waller was the father of 'smoothness' in English poetry.[10] But the tremendous political upheavals which began to sweep England around mid seventeenth century diverted the trend of the closed couplet from the social situation (where it best thrived) to a more serious context, the realm of politics.

The Short Couplet

If the decasyllabic couplet is the most familiar metre in English poetry, the octosyllabic runs it second. The short measure (the tetrameter couplet) belongs to a more ancient succession than the long one, going back to Anglo-Norman times and the traditions of accentual Latin hymns.⁽⁸⁾

The octosyllabic couplet dates back to the 12th and 13th centuries. It is a favoured form in English verse: a melodic instrument of ease and grace for some poets and, for others, a useful vehicle for rhetorical ends. The measure, invariable as it is, remained the chief element of metrical composition till Chaucer came and extended its range into decasyllabic. Of course the measure has its 'rules', but these remained, to most poets, optional and generally disregarded.[7] Chaucer used the couplet in continuous verse, (in *The House of Fame* and in *The Book of the Duchess*).

For the Elizabethan poets, the octosyllabic couplet was a form of greater prosodic regularity, ease, simplicity of expression, fitness--all combined to create perfect unity for the conventions of the lyric during the time. Shakespeare, Jonson, and other dramatists used it for lyrical passages in their drama; its patterns are more readily intelligible than those of the longer couplet.

whether in a poem or play. This is of course due to the rhythm of the iambic decasyllabic measure.

⁸ See note 1.

In continuous narratives, however, it often dissolves in the fluid advance of the poem, while in smaller stanzaic units it acquires structure. This stanzaic technique was never practised before, and it greatly differed from that of Chaucer's. Chaucer varied the lines of his octosyllabic couplets with seven syllables; his admirers soon imitated this irregularity, perhaps unrealizing it as a deficiency in such contexts: Puttenham considered it a defect and ill favoured; while Gascoigne advised poets to use 'just' or 'same measures' in their poems.[4]

In one of his most famous poems, *The Passionate Shepherd to his Love*, Marlowe not only varied the measure, but arranged it into quatrains, but Raleigh's reply, though strictly woven to the pattern, was exclusively unvariable. Both examples, however, are neatly fitted into the mould of couplet-quatrains; and the thought is well developed in stanzas. Octosyllabic couplets are too short to include an idea or hold a syntactic unity. It tends to overlap--that is why most poets used it in combination with other stanzas than stanzas of their own.

Thomas Campion, famous for composing intricately woven stanzas, never hesitated to employ the octosyllabic measure in his lyrics. He is well known for his prejudice against both rhyme and accentual verse, but when he used the octosyllabic measure he proved successful. He too varied the syllabic length of his lines, and composed couplet stanzas.

Jonson's disapproval of intricately woven stanzas and preference for simple couplets is self conscious. His use of the short couplet was extensive and rhetorically is outright. He can be considered the master of this couplet in its various uses. He is one of the few poets who tried to apply the general rules of the form in couplets: he tried to break his line into two opposing parts,

Where's thy quiver? Bend thy bow!

Here's a shaft--thou art too slow!

The Underwood 2. ii 9-10

Despite this example, Jonson rarely varied his octosyllabic couplets with heptameter, though he wrote complete poems in this latter measure.

Of all the poets of the period Marvell is the one who seemed most committed to the use of the short couplet, The octosyllabic predominates in his lyrical poetry; first by mere amount (three-fourths of the total) but also because of the superior quality of the pieces in which it is found alone.[14]

Pierre Legouis is hard on the facility of the measure--the 'total facility' as he calls it, quoting Byron. He is particularly ungenerous about Marvell's attempt to break the flow of short couplets into stanzaic units,

Marvell makes stanzas of a sort with groups of four couplets separated by roman figures. These units have little to do with the art of versification; at best they answer to the desire of dividing the movement of thought into equal time-lengths.[14]

Marvell and Herrick alternate lines of eight and six syllables, but still some technique was required for continuous (exclusively isometric) couplets

in longer poems; the use of verse paragraphs has that end. But monotony may be unavoidable. Legouis is not the first to complain about the couplet becoming mechanical: Daniel says 'to mine own ear, those continual cadences of couplets used in long and continued poems, are very tiresome, and unpleasing, they run on with a sound of one nature, and a kind of certainty which stuffs the delight rather than entertains it.'[4]

The first obvious manipulative of the short isometric couplet consists in the random modulation of the octosyllabic line into a heptasyllabic one as in Herrick's poem 'The Parting Verse.' But a more interesting example here is 'To Phillis' where the poet varies the lines and mixes between a Marlovian and Jonsonian traditions of melody, and rhetoric as well as caesural pauses. The structure of the quatrains which can be felt by the strong punctuation is being concealed by the steady progress of ideas in the poem. Most of Herrick's other couplets vary greatly; many are composed with definite endings and with pauses in the middle like his master Jonson; ultimately like classical couplets.

The short span of the octosyllabic line sometimes necessitated some sort of free treatment of the form: in expressing their thoughts, poets had either to compress the syntax of their couplets or the thought may come to overrun the barrier of the one couplet. Edmund Waller is regular and mechanical for example in 'At the Marriage of the Dwarfs', so is Thomas Carew in 'A Song' ('Ask me no more'), where in each stanza the two lines of 'injunction' and the two lines of 'explanation' convey a 'rigid observance' of the couplet. But when the argument becomes more complex, like the case in 'To A. L. Perswasions to Love,' Carew becomes forgetful of his couplets.[15]

John Milton's two lyrical pieces, *L'Alegro* and *Il Penseroso*, have a special status: they are composed in an inbuilt music; the rhythm moves with natural stresses in a way that never 'jingles' the ear, which in turn contributes to the perfect rhythm of nature. Metrically, both poems are almost identical. In their technique (an intricate prelude followed by continuous couplets) the two poems perhaps are unprecedented in English. Milton, in both poems, 'indiscriminately' diversifies his octosyllabic couplets with seven syllabic lines.[16] This artistic variation of lines, the prosodic rhythms, the movement of lines, punctuation and the pauses of *L'Alegro* in particular, coincide with the subject matter of the poem and with specific incidents experienced by the poet. The design of the poem seems to have been 'romantically transformed by exact and loving observation of a tract of country over a period of time, recollected in tranquility and suffused with poetical reminiscence'.[17] The shorter lines of the poem often give a light and 'tripping' movement to the poem, while others are 'decidedly slow', all of which adds to the cadence of the music and beauty of the poem.

Other isometric measures used include couplet of 7 syllables, like Waller's 'To Amorett,' Richard Lovelace's 'Orpheus to Woods;' 'Song'. William Browne's *The Shepherd's Pipe* and some of his epitaphs. Milton's *An Epitaph ... Winchester*; George Herbert's *L'Envoy*; Carew's 'Psalm 119.' Of 6 syllables we have for instance Herrick's couplet poem 'True Friendship' and his 'To

Death'. Drayton's *Skeletoniad*, mainly of six contains irregularities meant presumably to be reminiscent of Skelton. Drayton wrote a poem of even shorter syllables, of four, that is 'An Amouret Anacreontic.'

The Heterometric Measures

The 'poulter's measure'⁽⁹⁾ is the basic and most ancient form of the heterometric couplet. It is generally regarded as old fashioned now, but it was quite common in the past. Gascoigne talks about the measure as

the commonest sort of verse which we use nowadays (viz. the long verse of twelve and fourteen) I know not certainly how to name it, unless I should say that it doth consist of Poulter's measure, which gives xii for one dozen and xiiij for another. But let this suffice ... for the sundry sorts of verses which are used nowadays.[4]

The rule of the measure is that there should be a pause (caesura) after the sixth syllable of the first line and another after the eighth syllable of the second line. Its structure is basically without stanzaic arrangement; nonetheless, in some poems the unit falls apart into stanzas of four lines, that is lines with intermittent rhyme in the following form:

_____ a6 (syllables)
_____ b6
_____ c8
_____ b6.

The poulter's measure is 'intractable' and was generally regarded as a 'failure' by such critics as C. S. Lewis. He says,

...in a couplet made of two such yoke-fellows we seem to be labouring up a steep hill in bottom gear for the first line, and then running down the other side of the hill, out of control, for the second...[18]

Yet, the form was popular in sixteenth century England and was used by most poets to paraphrase texts and scenes from The Bible.[19] Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard were among the first practitioners of the measure; later on, Sidney, Drayton, Browne, and others joined in.

At this point it is worth mentioning that some poets of the Renaissance, perhaps in imitation of the poulter's measure, created their own version of the heterometric couplet in a variety of forms. These include examples like Donne's 'The Paradox' (a10a6); Abraham Cowley's 'The Motto and Not Fair' (a10a8); Henry Vaughan's 'The Sap' (a10a6); Jonson's 'The Forest 3', 'Underwood 85' and so on.

The trouble with the poulter's, is that it is too long-- a thing which keeps the ear so much to hear the tune or the cadence of the verses; in consequence, it becomes tedious. This problem, however, was overcome by

⁹ 'Poulter's measure' is a fanciful name for an old type of rhyming couplet consisting of lines of 12 and 14 syllables (a12a14) alternately and, because of its length which was sometimes difficult to manage, was divided into the ballad metre of (a6b6c8b6). The term derives from the poulter's traditional practice of giving 14 eggs in the second dozen.

some poets who divided their fourteeners into quatrains of alternating 8 and 6 syllabic lines; making their verses, as such, look more lively. Webbe explains how these poets divided their couplet whereof the two sixes rhyme (and sometimes the eight and sometimes not).[4]

The Function of the Couplet

The couplet, in all its forms, appears in English verse in one of the following cases:

a: As a unit of its own, where the couplet can stand independently especially in epigrams where the parallelism either of equivalence or contrast can be exploited. The form here is a vehicle for proverbial sayings, maxims and epitaphs.

b: As a metrically marked unit (in a way that the blank verse is not) in continuous series.

c: As a subordinate unit within an established (longer) form where, if left alone or isolated, it would not give ready sense. The sense of the couplet here depends largely on what has already been said. In some basic forms such as rhyme royal, ottava rima, and the English sonnet the couplet normally forms a summation of thought or an epigrammatic commentary.

Whether to consider a certain given couplet a complete entity, or merely a building block is a controversial matter. As stated above, for Puttenham the couplet was not a stanza proper. Indeed he may be right, for the form is generally too small to hold a complete unit of syntax and meaning without strain. Nevertheless, there are some cases where some couplets cannot be classified under any other stanzaic form but couplet stanzas. In this context, the little stanza forms a whole system of its own, complete and independent. This of course is largely due to the skill of some poets who gave the form its whole unity and detachment. Schipper calls the couplet 'two-line' stanza, 'the simplest' 'stanza', when it is isometric; he adds that in Northern English translations of the Psalms in the 13th century (Sortees Society, vols. xvi and xix), there are two lined stanzas of octosyllabic verses rhyming in couplets.[2] But this ancient treatment of the couplet as a whole stanza does not seem to have lasted long; in Middle English poetry couplets were basically used in longer poems that are not arranged in single stanzas.[2]

Towards the end of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a number of English poets recognized the kinship between the couplet (they have been practising) and the Latin (elegiac) distich. In this light, they extended the use of the couplet, after they had naturalized the Latin form into English to suit their aims. The couplet then became a stronger unit of composition for a variety of purposes.[10]

So the impact of the Latin (elegiac) distich and its hierarchical system of pauses (as well as the rhetorical aspects) was enormous; the tradition of the heroic (closed) couplet became even more popular. The English translations of the day (such as Marlowe's of Ovid) also helped laying the firm basis upon

which the closed couplet would develop.[10] Jonson also translated Ovid, Horace and, most importantly, the great classical epigrammatist Martial whose epigrams are mostly written in elegiac distiches.

Epigrams (conversational or expostulatory), and in addition forms such as epistle and the satire, found their way into England especially after 1590 in some form of (closed) heroic couplet. The fashion for such forms is parallel with the fashion for the closed couplet.[10] The success of the closed couplet, the simplest recognizable verse unit in English, stimulates or guarantees what Alastair Fowler calls 'the epigrammatic shift' in early seventeenth-century poetry, 'it was a sweeping generic transformation, affecting every literary element and most kinds'.[20]

Certain closed couplets can, if extracted, stand alone, though, even if an attempt is made to establish a logical or other relationships between couplets to overcome their tendency to close in their subject. Perhaps Shakespeare's sonnets couplets can be included here.

The subject of the epigram, hence, could be anything, though they generally include love, praise, elegy, maxims; often expressed in one couplet, but often extending to more than four couplets. The appropriateness of the single couplet, however, to gnomic elements and witty phrases encourages the tendency of the couplet to stand complete and independent in both form and content.[8] A new form emerges here, this is the single couplet-poem. It is normally epigrammatic, isometric and mostly of two decasyllabic lines. Donne wrote some, and Jonson's epigrams include about twenty of these poems, but Herrick's anthology *Hesperides* abounds in them (more than two hundred poems). A good example here is Jonson's 'Epigrams 10: To My Lord Ignorant':

Thou call'st me poet, as a term of shame;
But I have my revenge made in thy name.

Here Jonson achieves his witty opposition of elements over two lines. In Herrick it sometimes seems the fashion for the single couplet overtakes the function. He contrives his witty oppositions within a single line: 'Vinegar is no other I define,/Thou the dead corpse, or carkase of the wine'. Or even a single word: 'beauty, no other thing, than beame/Flasht out between the Middle and extreme.'

The peculiar tension between the disintegrative effect of the couplet and the effort to integrate sequences of couplets can be seen in 'Of Love' where eight octosyllabic lines in monorhyme (an effort at integration) rely for their point on the fact of dialogue exchange within each of the four constitutive couplets, and the witty oppositions contrived in their second lines:

1. Instruct me now, what love will do;
2. 'Twill make a tongless man to woove...

The single couplet unit as such has been a favourite form, where poets isolate certain subjects from related things and vigorously enclose them into a compact little world complete of its own. This state has been confirmed by

John Hollander, (Some lines should stay single:/Feminine rhymes can make them jingle).[21]

Couplets in this case are perhaps better termed distiches to distinguish them from the normal 'subordinate' couplets extensively used in narrative cases. But the most important simple fact about the couplet is its being the smallest unit in English of which the larger ones could be formed. The function of the couplet here is a 'subordinate' one; in this context it is dependent, especially in syntax, on the two neighbouring couplets. The usual pattern used in these places are the decasyllabic and octosyllabic, both of which measures are employed continuously for narrative, dramatic, satiric and reflective purposes.

Even when blank verse became the vogue in Elizabethan drama, the couplet was not abandoned: it was used at peak of dramatic action, or to conclude specific scenes of the play. The couplet, however, flourished again in the dramatic verse traditions of seventeenth century when whole 'heroic' plays were written in 'heroic couplets'.

Where it is not used exclusively, the couplet becomes the basic building unit for almost all larger stanza forms, especially the fixed ones. Indeed there is hardly an English stanza form which does not include in its structure a couplet or more of a certain measure.

Thus a couplet could easily be turned into a triplet by simply adding a third line of the same rhyme and measure. Triplets are often met with dispersed among couplets in narrative poems, especially when poets needed more room for expression. Poets also used triplets in such contexts in variation with the smaller unit; and to avoid monotony.

The couplet-quatrain is well known in the tradition of the four lined stanza; here we have a form consisting of two opposing couplets (of any isometric measure). Even the envelope quatrain (abba) contains an inner couplet sealed by an outer one. Some poets utilized two consecutive couplets to form monorhymed quatrains.

The couplet forms a basic part of the cinquain (stanzas of five) which is explicit from formulas like aaabb, aabab, aabbb, aabba, and so forth. In sixains (stanzas of six) it is also of vital importance, where we also have a whole stanza of couplets. The most popular of these sixains, is the "Venus and Adonis" by Shakespeare (ababcc) which concludes in a couplet. Also ending in a couplet is the famous septet (stanzas of seven), the rhyme royal ababbcc and the octet (stanzas of eight) ottava rima abababcc.

And in the Spenserian sonnet we have two couplets (ababbcbccdcdee) the effect of which is to join the quatrains to each other and to provide the structural basis for a particular tightness in the reasoning. This is true also of the two halves of the Spenserian stanza, whose centre frequently exhibits an almost Augustan tendency to antithesis,

...

What if some little paine the passage have,
That makes fraile flesh to feare the bitter wave?

...

I. ix.40

The couplet however remains the typical part that marks the English sonnet. Some poets even wrote sonnets in couplets.

Even in the most complicated of English forms, such as the ode, the canzone and the madrigal, the couplet is always there. It was used by Jonson, Cowley and Marvell in their odes in many variables. The couplet in these cases is the easiest and simplest way in which the poet would escape any poetic dilemma. Later in the age, at the hands of Dryden and Pope the couplet was used in translating epics of Homer and Virgil.

Conclusion

The couplet (especially the heroic couplet) is the most familiar of all English poetic forms. For some purposes the octosyllabic couplet was equally important; through its range we have some of the loveliest lyrics in English verse. Almost every English poet wrote couplets, even including those most reluctant to use rhyme at all. In the seventeenth century the couplet became the fashion of the day, exactly the way the sonnet was the fashion of the Elizabethan age. The progress of the couplet for the seventeenth century ends here; it lies beyond the purpose to trace the story any further in later movement.

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