Connections • Heroic Couplets

Even the phrase "heroic couplets" itself can tell us a lot about the associations of this verse form. First, they are couplets, pairs of rhymed lines (of iambic pentameter) that give a sense of balance between the two lines and often within each line as well. That the couplets are "heroic" signals, in the words of Jack Lynch, their "use in epic poetry in English, especially Dryden's translation of Virgil (1697) and Pope's translation of Homer (1715-26)."

Due primarily to the abilities and influence of Dryden and Pope, the eighteenth century is now understood to be the time of the heroic couplet's dominance of English poetry, after which the more experimental Romantic poets abandoned heroic verse for more flexible, modern forms. As you might expect, that broad outline has some truth to it, but exceptions abound. For example, my research has led me to look into university prize poems of the Romantic period. At least until the late 1820s, every winning poem consisted of heroic couplets. In an elite university's traditional sense of poetic merit, in other words, couplets carried the day long after the age of Pope had given way to what we now call Romanticism. Nonetheless, it is difficult to dispute J. Paul Hunter's point that "in the century and a half between Jonson and Churchill (from the 1630s to the 1780s) the couplet covered the British and American literary landscapes like the dew and dominated poetry like a tyrant."

This section will examine a few points in the history of the couplet to give an overview of its associations in poetry in English.

Part of the couplet's attraction for writers in English has been a sense that the couplets were the form of the greatest work of the proverbial "father of English poetry": Chaucer. Take the famous opening of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, for example:

```plaintext
Whan that aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
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Note that none of these lines contain any punctuation except at the end. As a rule, Chaucer's couplets create a smooth, flowing effect that lets the rhythm of the pentameter lines carry through long sentences without many dramatic stops, or caesurae, in the middle of lines.

[Web note: if you see Chaucer's lines and wish you were better at reading Middle English--and you should wish so because Middle English sounds terrific when read well--pop over to Larry D. Benson's *Teach Yourself to Read Chaucer's Middle English*.]
In the heyday of the couplet, Alexander Pope became the form's acknowledged master and most dogged practitioner; nearly all of Pope's poetry consists of heroic couplets. Pope's couplets tend to be balanced and regular, even by the standards of the couplet form. As noted in the page on caesurae, when you find a caesura in Pope's verse, it will most often come in the middle of a line, after the fourth, fifth, or sixth syllable. Using ostentatious rhymes, heavy end-stopping, and inverted sentence structures, Pope's couplets create humorous parallels and contrasts between high and low subjects, often reserving a witty rhyme for the couplet's close.

Much of Pope's verse engages in satirical mockery of human folly, as illustrated by this passage describing Belinda's "toilet" (dressing and makeup table, that is) in The Rape of the Lock:

And now, unveil'd, the toilet stands display'd,
Each silver vase in mystic order laid.
First, rob'd in white, the nymph intent adores
With head uncover'd, the cosmetic pow'rs.
A heav'nly image in the glass appears,
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
Th' inferior priestess, at her altar's side,
Trembling, begins the sacred rites of pride.
Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here
The various off'rings of the world appear;
From each she nicely culls with curious toil,
And deck's the goddess with the glitt'ring spoil.
This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,
And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.
The tortoise here and elephant unite,
Transform'd to combs, the speckled and the white.
Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux.
Now awful beauty puts on all its arms;
The fair each moment rises in her charms,
Repairs her smiles, awakens ev'ry grace,
And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.

As you look at the passage above, consider ways in which Pope parallels serious and trivial subjects within the couplet structure to create humor.

For more on Pope, see S. Constantine's Rape of the Lock page or The Victorian Web's introduction to the Essay on Man.

In some ways, the Romantic period (which began in the late 1700s in Britain and continued well into the nineteenth century in Britain, Europe, and the United States) saw the downfall of the couplet as writers turned to more flexible and variable forms. Certainly, the most canonical Romantic poets
rarely employed couplets. Though John Keats did write rhymed couplets, even he rebelled against the conventions of Pope's writing by using open couplets, which do not adhere to the strictly balanced structure of heroic couplets. Some poets of the Romantic period did use heroic couplets, generally to adopt a satirical tone about public events (as in Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*) or to address a particularly conservative audience--I found researching Romantic-era prize poems that every Oxford prize poem through at least 1834 was written in heroic couplets. The best couplets written during and after the Romantic period do, however, tend to use open couplets. Here is a famous example from the nineteenth century, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess":

That's my last duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
"Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
"Must never hope to reproduce the faint
"Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart--how shall I say?--too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked what'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace--all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men--good! but thanked
Somehow--I know not how--as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech--which I have not--to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
"Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
"Or there exceed the mark"--and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and make excuse,
--E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Many readers do not notice Browning's subtle couplets when first reading or hearing this poem. Consider the ways in which Browning's couplet form departs from Pope's in its use of enjambment, caesura, and parallelism. What does it mean for your reading of the poem that the Duke, who claims not to have "skill / In speech," creates these subtle couplets as he addresses the Count's envoy?