

Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Versification courtesy of Prof. R.F.W. Kroll

Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. Rev. ed. New York: Random, 1979.

The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Eds. M.H. Abrams et al. 6th edition. Volume 1. New York: Norton, 1993. The “Appendix” on poetic forms and terminology.

“[T]he couplet Dryden . . . favored . . . encourages, although it does not demand, the classification of experience because its typical syntax places the component of experience in nice parallel or pointed antithesis, closing up the comparison with a rhyme that emphasizes sententiousness”—Alan Roper.

The most characteristic verse form of the Restoration is the heroic couplet; and that of the eighteenth century, neo-Miltonic blank verse (as in Thomson’s The Seasons).

Broadly speaking, from earlier periods, we may say that the ode survives and reaches a climax in Keats’ great odes. The lyric only flourishes again when we get to Blake, and is fully vindicated in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

John Dryden’s (1631-1700) and Alexander Pope’s (1688-1744) poetry assumes the basic building block of the rhyming couplet, as in:

U / U / U / U / U /
All human things are subject to decay
U U / / U / U / U /
And when fate summons, monarchs must obey.

(MacFlecknoe)

You must listen to the pentameter line to catch its stresses (five of them) and notice the kinds of shifts in stress which can occur in order to emphasize meaning. (Ask yourself why the second line above emphasizes the nouns “fate” and “monarchs” and the verb “obey.”)

Although Dryden manipulates the couplet in some detail, it is best to read his poetry in blocks of argumentative or narrative paragraphs, as in this famous section of *Absalom and Achitophel* (Dryden attacking Shaftesbury):

Of these the false *Achitophel* was first:
A Name to all succeeding Ages curst.
For close Designs, and crooked Counsels sit;
Sagacious, Bold, and Turbulent of wit:
Restless, unfixt in Principles and Place;
In Pow’r unpleas’d, impatient of Disgrace.

A fiery Soul, which working out its way,
 Fretted the Pigmy-Body to decay:
 And o'r inform'd the Tenement of Clay.
 A daring Pilot in extremity;
 Pleas'd with the Danger, when the Waves went high
 He sought the Storms; but for a Calm unfit,
 Would Steer too nigh the Sands, to boast his Wit.
 Great Wits are sure to Madness near alli'd;
 And thin Partitions do their Bounds divide:
 (2.150-164, public domain ed.)

Pope, by contrast, focuses much more heavily on polishing the couplet as such, and squeezes everything he can from it, using immaculately chosen vocabulary, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. See the following description of Sporus, the critic, in *The Epistle to Arbuthnot*. Notice that the *caesura*—the break in the middle of the line—assumes more importance than in Dryden:

U / U / U / U / U /
 Eternal smiles, his emptiness betray
 U / U / U / U / U /
 As Shallow streams run dimpling all the way.

A completely regular, uninteresting meter echoes the critic's facile character. See also

U / U / U / U / U /
 Amphibious thing || that acting either part,
 U / U / U U U / U /
 The trifling head || or the corrupted heart,
 / U U / U / U U U U /
 Fop at the toilet, || flatterer at the board,
 U / U / U U U / U /
 Now trips a lady, || and now struts a lord.
 or / U

Pope uses antithesis and balance around the caesura to convey Sporus' "amphibious" nature.

In his *Life of Pope*, Samuel Johnson writes, "Pope had perhaps the judgement of Dryden; but Dryden certainly wanted the diligence of Pope . . . The notions of Dryden were formed by comprehensive speculation, and those of Pope by minute attention. There is more dignity in the knowledge of Dryden, and more certainty in that of Pope . . . The dilatory caution of Pope enabled him to condense his sentiments, to multiply his images, and to accumulate all that study might produce, or chance might supply. If the flights of Dryden therefore are higher, Pope continues longer on the wing. If of Dryden's fire the blaze is brighter, of Pope's the heat is more regular and constant. Dryden often surpasses expectation, and Pope never falls below it. Dryden is read with frequent astonishment, and Pope with perpetual delight." (Public domain edition.)