

Forms of Versification and Forms of Prose

Heroic couplet

A **heroic couplet** is a traditional form for [English poetry](#), commonly used in [epic](#) and [narrative poetry](#), and consisting of a rhyming pair of lines in [iambic pentameter](#). Use of the heroic couplet was pioneered by [Geoffrey Chaucer](#) in the [Legend of Good Women](#) and the [Canterbury Tales](#),^[1] and generally considered to have been perfected by [John Dryden](#) and [Alexander Pope](#) in the Restoration Age and early 18th century respectively.

The term "heroic couplet" is sometimes reserved for couplets that are largely *closed* and self-contained, as opposed to the [enjambéd](#) couplets of poets like [John Donne](#). The heroic couplet is often identified with the [English Baroque](#) works of [John Dryden](#) and [Alexander Pope](#), who used the form for their translations of the epics of [Virgil](#) and [Homer](#), respectively. Major poems in the closed couplet, apart from the works of Dryden and Pope, are [Samuel Johnson's](#) *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, [Oliver Goldsmith's](#) *The Deserted Village*, and [John Keats's](#) *Lamia*. The form was immensely popular in the 18th century. The looser type of couplet, with occasional enjambment, was one of the standard verse forms in medieval narrative poetry, largely because of the influence of the [Canterbury Tales](#).

In the Neo-classical age, it became the dominant measure and was used for drama, satire, descriptive and narrative verse. Dryden used the heroic couplet in his verse. He gave it an additional vigor, a sinewy elegance and a noble rhythm and beauty. It was left until Pope to perfect the heroic couplet. He used it in all his significant poems such as *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Dunciad*, *Essay on Man* and *Essay on Criticism*. He was the most consummate master of the closed couplet and confined the sense more vigorously than ever within the two lines. He used the heroic couplet with great metrical skill, variation of speed, delicacy of touch and made his couplets quite memorable.

Heroic couplet was used with rare brilliance and effect for satirical and intellectual poetry. In the hands of Pope, it acquired a perfection and 'correctness' which left

Dryden far behind, and which could not be approached by any of his contemporaries and successors. But excessive refinements lead to monotony and rigidity in the hands of the followers of Pope.