

Pope's Versification - Handling of Heroic Couplet: Pope of the Lock

(10)

Pope's chosen measure was the heroic couplet. This term is used for a measure consisting of two lines of ten syllables, each in iambic metre, rhyming together. It is known as heroic for it was used in English epics and heroic poetry to narrate the exploits of the heroes. Pope could not use any other measure successfully. He used it for literary criticism, moral preaching, satire and burlesques.

This metre was first used by Chaucer with great mastery and skill. The Elizabethans also used it, but they used it like loose blank verse, sense running from one couplet to another. Dryden, too, used this couplet with a great force. His purpose was to develop the colloquial principle of Drayton and his followers. Dryden's handling of this has a characteristic sweep. He made frequent use of triplets and Alexandrines. Pope, on the other hand, used it as having a beginning, a middle and an end.

Pope's couplets are closed, the sense does not run on from one couplet to another. This running of sense is known as enjambent. There is no enjambent in Pope. The sense is complete or nearly complete with each couplet:-

"O thoughtless mortals! over blind to faith,

Too soon dejected and too soon elate."

In each couplet, Caesura or pause is placed exactly in the middle, after the fourth syllable and before the sixth. The caesura is not varied and this results in monotony:-

"The courtiers' promises, and Dickson's prayer

The saute of harlots, and the tears of heers."

There is no splitting of couplets. Pope makes each of them a separate unit in itself. At the end, there is generally single rhyme that is only one syllable of the last word of each of the two lines. Poly-rhymes for example, the last syllable rhymes of prayers rhymes with that of heers. There is no double rhyme in Pope.

Pope's couplets are characterised by brevity and preciseness. They are well polished, refined and correct.

M.A. HAQUE

They have a rare brilliancy. They are epigrammatic and easily memorisable. Pope is really matchless for condensation and concentration. See the very opening Couplet -

"What dire offence from amorous Causes springs
What mighty contests rise from trivial things"

Unlike Dryden, Pope does not use Alexandrine, a line of twelve syllables, and triplets, three lines rhyming together. There is no looseness, each Couplet is well balanced and compact.

Pope was a learned person who dived deep into the classics and brought about some classic harmony and literary charms. He has introduced these elements into the heroic Couplet. Dryden's couplets don't even ^{have} the trace of these charms.

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"Sol through white Curtains shot a timorous ray
And opened those eyes that must eclipse the day"

But, there is no denying the fact, that Pope is unmechanical. He lacks varieties and so grows monotonous. As the sense must end with each Couplet, he has to narrow it down. There is frequent use of repetition of the same rhyme that shows a poverty of vocabulary. He could never equal the music and melody of the great poets.

Though some of the Pope's rhymes are faulty and ~~he~~ lacks the music of Shelley and Coleridge, we should not forget that he belongs to an age of prose. He was writing in the age of reason, intellect and rationality. So his poetry must be enjoyed primarily for its sense. It would be as unfair to ask from him the quality of Romantics, as to ask a portrait painter to paint a landscape.

To conclude, Pope's range may be limited to one measure, but he has used it with rare brilliancy and skill. He was a genius and transformed whatever he touched.