A Brief History of the Septet

by Wayne Lee

The first known appearance of a heptastich (seven-line poem) in English was in the late 13th century when Goeffrey Chaucer (c. 1340s-1400) used the form in his 1,870-line epic poem "Troilus and Criseyde." Each stanza of the poem consists of seven iambic pentameter lines rhyming *ababbcc*. Here is the first stanza:

> The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
> That was the king Priamus sone of Troye,
> In lovinge, how his aventures fellen
> Fro wo to wele, and after out of Ioye,
> My purpos is, er that I parte fro ye.
> Thesiphone, thou help me for tendyte
> Thise woful vers, that wepen as I wryte!

Chaucer also employed the form in five of his "Canterbury Tales."

He didn't invent the rime royal, though. Chaucer was influenced by earlier Italian writers such as Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300-1377) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), who were already writing septets. "Troilus" was, in fact, based on Boccaccio's "Il Filostrato," a narrative poem written in ottava rima, an eight-line form. French writers had been using the seven-line rime royal form since the 13th century, which they called chant royale. They preferred it for ceremonies, especially those celebrating the arrival of royals into cities, as well as for mock ceremonies at guild festivals.

Chaucer himself never referred to the form as rime royal. That term was believed to have been coined by Chaucer admirer King James I of Scotland (1394-1437), who took up the form, which he called rhyme royale, in his collection of romantic poems *The Kingis Quair* (*The King's Book*). The form also became known as the Chaucerian stanza and Troilus stanza.

Rime Royal became a preferred stanzaic form for long narrative poems during the 15th and early 16th centuries. Poet and critic George Gascoigne (c. 1535-1577) explained that, “This hath bene called Rithme royall, and surely it is a royall kinde of verse, serving best for grave discourses.” Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) wrote his poem, “They Flee from Me,” in five rime royal stanzas. Here is stanza number one:

> They flee from me that sometime did me seek
> With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.
> I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,
> That now are wild and do not remember
> That sometime they put themself in danger
> To take bread at my hand; and now they range,
> Busily seeking with a continual change.

Wyatt later took more liberties with the form in his “A Revocation,” using an *ababacc* rhyme scheme and a then-radical use of dimeter syllabic count. It opens this way:

> What should I say?
> —Since Faith is dead,
> And Truth away
> From you is fled?
> Should I be led
> With doubleness?
> Nay! nay! mistress.

Sir Edmund Spenser (c. 1552-3-1599) made his contribution with the irregularly metered “Fowre Hymnes,” which departs from pentameter to alexandrine (12 iambic syllables) in L6. Here is the opening stanza:

> Loue, that long since hast to thy mighty powre,
> Perforce subdude my poore captiued hart,
> And raging now therein with restlesse stowre,
> Doest tyrannize in euerie weaker part;
> Faine would I seeke to ease my bitter smart,
> By any seruice I might do to thee, Or ought
> that else might to thee pleasing bee.

William Shakespeare (1565-1616) also tried his hand at the form. He arranged the 1,855 iambic pentameter lines of his epic poem "The Rape of Lucrece" in the traditional rime royal format, although it did not meet with much success. Here is the first of his 265 stanzas:

> From the besieged Ardea all in post,
> Borne by the trustless wings of false desire,
> Lust-breathed Tarquin leaves the Roman host,
> And to Collatium bears the lightless fire
> Which, in pale embers hid, lurks to aspire
> And girdle with embracing flames the waist
> Of Collatine's fair love, Lucrece the chaste.

John Milton (1608-1674) published his "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" in 1645 in his *Poems*, but it was largely ignored until the 18th century when its Spenserian imagery came back into fashion. You can see how the introduction shifts to the alexandrine in the final line of the otherwise traditional rime-royal stanza:

> This is the month, and this the happy morn,
> Wherein the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,
> Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
> Our great redemption from above did bring;
> For so the holy sages once did sing,
> That he our deadly forfeit should release,
> And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

Despite the rime royal falling out of favor during the 17th century, poets continued to dabble with heptastich constructions. In the 18th century, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) composed his "Resolution and Independence" in 20 regular rime royal stanzas. The poem opens with this:

> There was a roaring in the wind all night;
> The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
> But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
> The birds are singing in the distant woods;
> Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
> The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
> And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.

Over time, poets began taking more liberties with the iambic pentameter *ababbcc* conventions and experimenting with other seven-line variations. Some of those forms are purely syllabic, while others require alternative rhyme schemes, alliteration, a specific theme, emphasis on particular parts of speech or letters of the alphabet, and other parameters. George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), for example, maintained the iambic pentameter tradition, but employed a new *aabccbb* rhyme scheme (since referred to as a Byron septet) in his poem, "Remembrance":

> 'Tis done!—I saw it in my dreams;
> No more with Hope the future beams;
> My days of happiness are few:
> Chill'd by misfortune's wintry blast,
> My dawn of life is overcast;
> Love Hope, and Joy, alike adieu!
> Would I could add Remembrance too!

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1859) wrote one of the six stanzas of "Annabel Lee" as an unmetered heptastich, using an original *abbabxb* rhyme scheme:

> But our love it was stronger by far than the love
> Of those who were older than we,
> Of many far wiser than we,
> And neither the angels in heaven above,
> Nor the demons down under the sea,
> Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
> Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.

Poe also wrote a septet called "To Margaret" that included references to Milton, Cowper, Shakespeare and Pope:

> Who hath seduced thee to this foul revolt
> From the pure well of Beauty undefiled?
> So banished from true wisdom to prefer
> Such squalid wit to honourable rhyme?
> To write? To scribble? Nonsense and no more?
> I will not write upon this argument
> To write is human—not to write divine.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) penned her septet “If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking” using an irregular meter and a novel rhyme scheme of *ababccb*:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841-1935) wrote his five-stanza “The Chambered Nautilus” in an *aabbbcc* hybrid, with each stanza mixing pentameter, trimeter and hexameter rhythms in varying line lengths. Here is the stanza number one:

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
Sails the unshadowed main,—
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Laurence Binyon (1869-1943) created his own heptastich variation in his “O World, Be Nobler,” an envelope verse form composed in iambic tetrameter with a rhyme scheme *AbccbaA* in which line 1 is repeated as line 7:

O World, be nobler, for her sake!
If she but knew thee what thou art,
What wrongs are borne, what deeds are done
In thee, beneath thy daily sun,
Know’st thou not that her tender heart
For pain and very shame would break?
O World, be nobler, for her sake!

Franz Werfel (1890–1945) did away with any metrical or rhyming considerations when he ventured into free-verse territory with his “Six Septets To Honor the Spring of 1905.” It opens like this:

Maria Immisch was the springtime.
With feeling and reverence
I snatch her adored name from the underworld.
When I was fifteen in '05, that year
—they celebrated the big Schiller centennial
—and I saw her as heroine in his famous plays.
To this day my heart's still thankful.

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973) included a seven-line song called “All Woods Must Fail” in *The Fellowship of the Ring,* the first novel in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The lines follow a simple rhyme scheme of *aabbccd* and have a similar length, with either eight or nine syllables per line:

O! Wanderers in the shadowed land
Despair not! For though dark they stand,
All woods there be must end at last,
And see the open sun go past:
The setting sun, the rising sun,
The day's end, or the day begun.
For east or west all woods must fail.

The seven-line format has enjoyed a modest renaissance in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, with a bevy of newly minted forms bearing inventive names such as the alliterisen, epulaeryu, lyrette, sestonelle, seguidilla and Kwansaba.

The sevenling has become particularly popular in recent years. It is a heptastich with a similar structure to “He Loved Three Things Alone” byAnna Akhmatova (1889-1966) :

He loved three things alone:
White peacocks, evensong,
Old maps of America.
He hated children crying,
And raspberry jam with his tea,
And womanish hysteria.
… And he married me.

Richard Garcia's "Five Sevens" is comprised of five sevenlings, although he does not arrange his "sevens" in the proscribed structure of two three-line stanzas and a single concluding line. Here's the first stanza:

A black tablecloth billowed from a black ceiling.
An army surplus bomb casing painted black.
A night parade, seven grocery carts.
Chance reunion, a purse held upside down in Mexico City.
Screaming at La Plaza de Garibaldi.
Followed by thieves, changing cabs.
Living on the beach, pavement sways like the sea.

Sherman Alexie has also written a number of sevenlings. "Communion" is one of my favorites:

This is the last poem I will write about salmon,
My tribe's Jesus fish, our God fish, bedamning
And bedamned. I will no longer examine

And reexamine the sins that doomed our fish.
I will not weep. My pain and fear are banished.
This is my last lamentation, my last wish:

Let my people's famine become our Eucharist.

These examples are testimony to the enduring appeal of the various heptastich forms, and new variations are being invented all the time. I have added to the contemporary canon by creating two new forms of my own, the Flint (see "Watching Koi") and the septorale ("Sixteenth Day of Spring").