

## Chaucer's Use of Rhyme Royal: *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*

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### Abstract

This article offers a new perspective on Geoffrey Chaucer's rhyme royal stanzas in his poetry. Rhyme royal, a seven-line stanza with an ababbcc rhyme scheme, is remarkable for its complexity and multi-functionality. In this investigation, we studied the background of the rhyme royal stanza, the main structural and thematic characteristics, and the immediate use of it in Chaucer's most significant works of art, specifically *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. By carefully studying the relevant select passages, the article emphasizes the role of the form Chaucer chose, rhyme royal, to better the telling and expression of the poems.

**Keywords:** *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer, rhyme royal, *Troilus and Criseyde*

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### Introduction

Gibaldi (1980, p. ix) puts this study of Chaucer's works in its proper perspective: "... no other literary figure continues to generate more enthusiasm and dedication in teachers and students alike than Geoffrey Chaucer does." However, Gibaldi laments "the decline of the study of both language and history in contemporary American education ... of linguistic and historical interest or even awareness." We hope this present study may stimulate an awareness and an interest in one of the less studied aspects of Chaucer's work, i.e., his selective use of rhyme royal.

Rhyme royal is different from other poetic forms in several ways, including structure, rhyme scheme, and historical usage (Brogan & Stevens, 1993, p. 1065). We analyzed each of these factors in the poems in which Chaucer chose to write in rhyme royal.

### Structure

Rhyme royal is a unique stanza type that consists of seven lines, a rarity in English poetry. The more popular forms are the Shakespearean sonnet's fourteen lines or the Spenserian stanza's nine lines.

### Rhyme Scheme

ababbcc is the rhyme scheme in practice, where the main focal point of communication and the "lazy" or "overdone" couplets at the end of the stanza characterize it not only as a prevailing poetic form but also as a unique one. The rhyme scheme of ababbcc is distinctive. This interlocking rhyme pattern combines the tight, couplet-like ending with a more complex preceding structure, separating it from forms like the heroic couplet (aa, bb, cc) or the straightforward quatrains of other stanzas.

### Historical Usage

Invented by Geoffrey Chaucer, rhyme royal was a form that was quite popular in medieval English poetry. Rhyme royal's outstanding expression in the literary and historical context is a style not often used in the period of English literature, which is usually characterized by narrative and didactic themes. Introduced by Geoffrey Chaucer, rhyme royal was primarily used in the Middle English poetic era. The uniqueness of its historical and literary context gives it a place in the tradition of English verse, which is often associated with narrative and didactic themes. Although the rhymes are firmly fixed in the same rhythm, rhyme royal enables a wide range of

expression within its structure. This form can be used for storytelling and also includes more lyrical and reflexive content; therefore, it offers both formal and poetic freedom.

### The Research Question

Why did Chaucer use rhyme royal for just four of the twenty-four tales in *The Canterbury Tales* and for his poetic retelling of the ancient story of *Troilus and Criseyde*? What did Chaucer have in mind when he designed this new model for those particular poems?

### Methods

We employ several complementary methods of inquiry. Our premise is that multiple approaches can improve the validity of the analysis and evaluation of our understanding of Chaucer's decision to write some of his works in rhyme royal while, for the most part, maintaining the iambic pentameter of each line. This research takes the "close reading" method, where referring to the texts is interpreted as a reference to prominent characters in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. The research explores the stanzas' rhyme scheme, meter, and thematic content. Secondary sources, such as articles, and historical texts on Middle English poetry, were also studied to give the picture of Chaucer's life and times in the fourteenth century.

The theoretical foundation of the study is poststructuralist literary theory. Each reader finds meaning that may differ from that discerned by another reader. In the case of poetry, where much is left to the imagination of the reader or listener, it is even more important to scan the text for some understanding of the scope of the text. In *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, there is ample room for various interpretations.

### Results

Rhyme royal possesses such a combination of features that the form is unique and remarkably adaptable. The same poetic form can be used as much for narrative poetry as for other purposes. Geoffrey Chaucer played a seminal role in the development of English poetry. One of his most

enduring poetic creations is the rhyme royal stanza. This kind of stanza is a form of meter that adds sophistication and elegance to his poems. Rhyme royal and a seven-line stanza with an ababbcc rhyme scheme provided the basis for the debate of rhyme versus meter, which is the main essence of poetical and narrative facets of the text. The focal point of this work is exploring Chaucer's use of rhyme royal, which will be done by looking at the structural characteristics and the themes we found in selected works.

MacCracken long ago (1909, p. 31) disposed of the idea, at one time enjoying some currency, that the term "royal" derived from a poem written by King James. Chaucer introduced rhyme royal to the English language two centuries earlier, which was a thoroughly new form to the language. It spread from France and Italy to England, becoming one of the ancient forms and the most prominent one in English. The seven-line stanza, the most recognized form, which is written in iambic pentameter, uses the ababbcc scheme of rhyme. The unique seven-line rhyme royal verse form serves as a means for a well-structured and connected composition. The rhyme scheme provides cohesion and coherence (Brogan & Stevens, 1993).

### Rhyme royal in *The Canterbury Tales*

Of all twenty-four tales, Chaucer wrote only four in rhyme royal: Second Nun, Clerk, Prioress, and Man of Laws (Brody, 1985, p. 114). We naturally want to know why only four and why these four? Critics vary in their answers. Rhyme royal is used in these stories differently and for different purposes in *The Canterbury Tales*. For example, in "The Man of Law's Tale," the form is employed to increase the ethical and allegorical meaning of the narrative. The controlled rhyme sequence supports the didactic objective of the narrative, leading the reader through the moral lessons accompanying the tale.

### Prioress

Picard (2017) asks the question that may be asked of each of the pilgrims: "But what was she doing on the road to Canterbury? She should have

been in her priory looking after her nuns and praying to God, not junkering off on pilgrimage” (p. 191). Jones (1985, p. 27) observes from the famous 1400 Ellesmere Manuscript that she was riding side-saddle, as befits a lady of the time. We have commented elsewhere about the anomalous Prioress (Raupp, 2022). Scholars specializing in medieval English literature have talked about how significant the use of rhyme royal is “The Prioress’s Tale,” which begins as shown below:

O Lord our lord, thy name how merveillous a  
 Is in this large worlde y-sprad—quod she:— b  
 For noght only thy laude precious a  
 Parfourned is by men of dignitee, b  
 But by the mouth of children thy bountee b  
 Parfourned is, for on the brest soukinge c  
 Som tyme shewen they thyn herynge. c

(Chaucer, et al., 2008, p. 209)

The tale has thematic and stylistic implications. The following are some reasons literary experts provide regarding why Chaucer would choose to use rhyme royal for “The Prioress’s Tale.”

**Elegance and Formality.** During the era when Chaucer lived, rhyme royal was seen as a noble verse form and formal, which was often utilized when addressing subjects that were either serious or elevated. This poem speaks of themes like martyrdom and faith which make it look more serious. While at the same time rhyming crowning adds a touch of elegance

**Narrative Structure.** In narrative storytelling, rhyme royal, with its structured nature (seven lines with a consistent rhyme scheme), lends itself well. In this tale, Chaucer also employs this form to evoke effectual structure, hence maintaining the orderly flow of his tale.

**Literary Tradition.** Chaucer had knowledge of French and Italian poetry traditions that employed rhymed royal forms. Thus, he may have been paying homage to these traditions while fitting it into an English context.

**Audience and Reception.** His audience already knew about rhyme royal from other works

such as *Troilus and Criseyde*. Using a well-known form could have increased its reception among his peers.

In summary, through placing the poem in an overall story-like pattern, he uses language structures that suit both narrative style as well as thematic elements of “The Prioress’ Tale,” making him prove his poetic genius for the time being.

### *Man of Laws*

**Tone And Intentionality Of Characters.** The Man of Laws’ character is portrayed as an informed, authoritative person. His use of language in rhyme royal may be seen as a reflection that mirrors his persona and legal-mindedness. The regularity present in its structure shows how organized he is, hence enhancing symbolism via narrative voice.

**Tradition And Influence.** It is possible that Chaucer took some ideas from previous poems written in rhyme royal with the aim of following or continuing those traditions. His employment of this verse format in the text could indicate how poetry moved on over time due to his creative input.

Rhyme royal experts generally agree that Chaucer's use of rhyming scheme (rhyme) shows deliberation whereby he sought to give additional dimensions to the subject matter, role-playing mode, and melodic nature, thus affirming his genius at manipulating poetic forms to fit the story. Consistent with Chaucer’s rhyme royal decision, “The Man of Law’s Tale” begins with the following seven lines:

In Surrie whylom dwelte a companye a  
 Of chapmen riche, and therto sadde and trewe, b  
 That wyde-wher senten her spycerye, a  
 Clothes of gold, and satins riche of hewe; b  
 Her chaffar was so thrifty and so newe, b  
 That every wight hath deyntee to chaffare c  
 With hem, and eek to sellen hem hir ware. c

(Chaucer, et al., 2008, p. 89)

The decision by Chaucer to write rhyme royal in “The Man of Law’s Tale” has been a mystery to

scholars, as they have studied various reasons for this choice.

**Plain Elocution.** The high and somewhat strange and foreign story of Constance, who is an honorable Christian lady who goes through diverse experiences, can well be presented in rhyme royal with its noble form. The refinement of this style coincides with themes of moral strength, patience, and divine involvement.

**Subject Relevance.** When it comes to morals and religion, "The Man of Law's Tale" is a complex story. Chaucer uses the structured form of rhyme royal to explore these aspects in a formal manner. In particular, the seven-line stanza provides a rhythm which can emphasize the seriousness and meditative nature of his story.

**Common Cultural Background.** Rhyme royal was considered a serious and high-quality literary work during Chaucer's time. Incorporating this stanzaic structure into the Man of Law's Tale makes other works written within that period seem more respectful or superior, making it look like he wrote respected literature.

### *Second Nun*

Chaucer preferred rhyme royal, a stanza consisting of seven lines (ababbcc) of iambic pentameter, because this choice was rooted in some stylistic and thematic reasons.

**Stylistic Influence.** The Italian poets, especially the works of Giovanni Boccaccio, had a great influence on Chaucer. Rhyme royal could have been inspired by the Italian ottava rima, which Chaucer transformed into a seven-line form for his works (Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer Website) (Oxford Academic).

**Thematic Suitability.** In Chaucer's time, it was often used for "grave discourses" or stories with serious subjects. It was also thought to be fit for tales dealing with innocent victims' sufferings, and narratives having a solemn tone. In "The Second Nun's Tale," which discusses the life and martyrdom of St. Cecilia, the poem's use of rhyme royal is significant as it helps emphasize that the story is

meant to be religious and moral (Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer Website) (Washington State University).

**Narrative Purpose.** In using rhyme royal, Chaucer wanted to impart to the reader an impression of neatness and propriety in keeping with legends about saints. Such a decision corresponds to devotional and didactic purposes of the tale that show how much he respected his sources, such as "Legenda Aurea" (The Golden Legend), while maintaining solemnity and teaching aspects of it. (Washington State University) (Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer Website).

Through adopting rhyme royal in "The Second Nun's Tale," Chaucer enhances its formality and respectfulness which harmonizes with saintly characteristics as well as manifesting his literary background and personal style. Again, following the pattern of seven lines of iambic pentameter rhyming ababbcc, "The Second Nun's Tale," begins with these seven lines:

This mayden bright Cecilie, as hir lif seith,	a
Was comen of Romayns and of noble kynde,	b
And from hir cradel up fostred in the faith	a
Of Crist, and bar his gospel in hir mynde.	b
She nevere cessed, as I writen fynde,	b
Of hir preyere and God to love and drede,	c
Bisekyng hym to kepe hir maydenhede.	c

(Chaucer, et al., 2008, p. 264)

### *Clerk*

For several reasons, Geoffrey Chaucer also chose to write "The Clerk's Tale" in rhyme royal. The tale begins with these seven lines:

Ther is, at the west syde of Itaille,	a
Doun at the rote of Vesulus the colde,	b
A lusty playne, habundant of vitaille,	a
Wher many a tour and toun thou mayst biholde,	b
That founded were in tyme of fadres olde,	b
And many another delitable sighte,	c
And Saluces this noble contree highte.	c

Various scholars have different perspectives on this choice:

**Literary Tradition and Prestige.** Chaucer, according to A. C. Spearing (2001), had chosen rhyme royal because it was associated with high status literary works. In this way Chaucer could impart seriousness and dignity to his story as he addresses such serious issues as patience, loyalty, and suffering.

**Formal Control and Complexity.** Rhyme royal allows a high degree of formal control and complexity. The particular rhyme structure of the form contributes to its sophisticated construction, thus revealing Chaucer's technical expertise as a poet.

**Appropriateness to the Tale's Themes.** According to John H. Fisher (1973, p. 124), the rhyme royal form is particularly suited for "The Clerk's Tale" because of its thematic content. It would be appropriate to say that Griselda's far-fetched story is solemn and dignified, while the regal form of rhyme royal underpins these qualities, enhancing the emotional and moral effectiveness of the narrative.

**Influence of French and Italian Poetic Traditions.** Dean (1991) claims, albeit obliquely, that French and Italian poetic traditions influenced Chaucer's decisions to write in rhyme royal. The earlier poets such as Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart wrote in what was also called the "Troilus measure." Knowing European trends well enough, Chaucer might have chosen this model for his work.

**Audience Expectations and Courtly Connections.** Cooper (1997) writes that it was supposed that people who saw Chaucer's work were familiar with the rhyme royal form he used, since they included not only members of the English court but also prominent persons outside it. By employing this pattern, Chaucer targeted his writing at a select group, appealing to the elite who were fashionable and learned.

**Narrative Pace and Emphasis.** Eckhardt (1990, p. 239), writes that the rhyme royal structure allows for a measured and deliberate pace of narrative which can emphasize key moments in the

story. Regularity and rhythm of the form might underline the moralism of the tale and Griselda's stoicism, thus making it suitable for its didactic purpose as narrated by the Clerk.

In conclusion, Chaucer's adoption of rhyme royal may be considered as an intentional artistic choice reflecting his era's literary traditions, thematic requirements, and audience expectations. Different experts focus on specific aspects of this decision to emphasize Chaucer's expertise, influences from other poets, and appropriateness in relation to the narrative's nature.

### **Rhyme Royal in *Troilus and Criseyde***

Strohm (2015) notes that Chaucer wrote *Troilus and Criseyde* "on the brink of the 1386 crisis," as the crown was teetering on the head of Richard II, and Chaucer "was rather torturously pursuing some of his own new thoughts" (p. 204). This may help us to understand his use of rhyme royal in *Troilus and Criseyde* in light of the emotional and psychological portrayal of the characters. The following stanza is a tangible evidence that Chaucer masterfully handles this special form:

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

(Chaucer, et al., 2008, p. 473)

The ababbcc rhyme scheme produces a unified and well-interconnected storyline and helps Chaucer show how love, trust, and destiny matter. Also, the use of iambic pentameter, which is the rhythmic regularity of time just as in normal speech, makes the poem lively, as well as easy to understand.

Geoffrey Chaucer's use of the rhyme royal in *Troilus and Criseyde* is highly significant and has been a matter for much academic debate. The following are some possible explanations given by

specialists for Chaucer's preference of this stanza form:

**Style and Charm.** Rhyme royal, the seven-lined stanza with the rhyme scheme ababbcc, is recognized for its stylistic beauty and suitability for narrative verse. This structure balances lyrical expression and narrative progression well enough to suit romances that mix romance, tragedy, and psychology.

**French and Italian Influence.** Chaucer was greatly influenced by French as well as Italian traditions of poetry which had similar stanza forms. The adoption of rhyme royal might be attributed to Chaucer's adaptation of European styles to English poetry. For instance, works like Boccaccio, who used complex stanza forms, may have compelled him to copy their sophistication.

**Raising the Stakes.** By trying out rhyme royal, Chaucer may have aimed at raising the status of his literature a notch higher. *Troilus and Criseyde* is an intricate philosophical romance which can benefit from the weightiness brought forth by rhyme royal's formal structure appropriate for themes such as love, fate or chance.

**Freedom and Adaptability.** *Troilus and Criseyde* employs varied tones and viewpoints which can be conveniently handled through using rhyme royals. Other parts include dramatic scenes, reflective monologues, and philosophical statements. All of these are effortlessly reconciled one after another due to a cyclical nature present in this type of poem.

**Traditionalism versus Innovation.** Though not the first person on earth ever employing it in his verses, Chaucer was among the earliest influential English poets using it. Its effective application in *Troilus and Criseyde* earned acknowledgement towards English literature becoming established as a traditional poetic form of respectability. In this case he has also set an example for future poets who wanted to underline its place as an extended narrative poetry.

**Aesthetic Pleasure.** Rhyme royal is a musical and rhythmically interesting form which

can increase our aesthetic enjoyment. The well-structured ending, with its interlocking rhymes and concluding couplet, serves to achieve a completeness or satisfaction that resonates with the emotional and thematic trajectories of the poem.

In essence, Chaucer's selection of rhyme royal exemplifies his aim to be regarded as a great writer, his participation in European literary practices, and his cognizance of the appropriateness of this format on both narrative and theme.

### Discussion

Chaucer's invention of rhyme royal marks a landmark in English poetry. The pattern in rhyme royal's stanza allows the poet to build a huge palette of meters and themes. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, a climax is achieved through rhyme royal, which gives an insight into the complicated nature of feelings. *The Canterbury Tales* uses rhyme royal to bring the individual stories of the characters to life as well as the materialization of the overall canvas of the work.

Chaucer was a good example of what was meant by a master of rhyme royal, who once again did this by using a new form of poetics that was both beautiful and deep. His invention of this poetic style not only has a direct influence on the continuation of English literature. It is also the root of the basis which lets others try similar brave topics, as it should be considered as the source of the discovery.

A wonderful thing one notices about Geoffrey Chaucer is his capacity for experimentation and originality as a poet. His use of rhyme royal was not a mere manifestation of the innovative, creative skills that made him a poet. He took a highly complicated stanza form and infused it with a breath of fresh air. The result was that Chaucer gave the whole of the English poetic heritage a new instrument of thoughtful and elevated expression. The ababbcc rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter create a framework that magnifies the plot development and the sadness or joy that the reader gets from his masterpieces.

In the end, we do not know why Chaucer chose the number seven for the number of lines in

the rhyme royal verse. In some cultures, seven is often considered a lucky number. The number abounds in the Bible: Creation in seven days (Genesis 1:1–2:3); Sabbath every seven days (Exodus 20:8-11); Joshua’s conquest of Jericho in seven days (Joshua 6:1-20); God promises a sevenfold vengeance on anyone who kills Cain (Genesis 4:15); Seven Churches, Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls (Revelation 1:4, 5:1, 8:2, 16:1). Seven is the most common outcome of rolling two dice. Did any of this influence Chaucer’s selection of the number of lines in a stanza? That question remains for another day.

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