

## Metre and English verse

Metre is one of those aspects of English literature which is most apt to repel the schoolchild. If it is badly taught, it may remain a confusing morass of jargon. Even if the technical basics are well taught, the analytical and literary function of the squiggles may be mysterious. This is a terrible shame, because metre – the patterns of stress in a line of poetry; their relation to the sounds and rhythms of a poem – can form a great part of the appreciation of English verse. It makes ‘close analysis’ more rigorous and indeed comprehensible, because there is meaning behind the jargon. It helps us explain in precise terms the visceral feeling great poetry elicits. This is the ultimate purpose of close analysis, though the demands of exam boards sometimes cloud it – in this sense, what a poet intended is of little importance. An effect exists regardless of intent. Indeed, a good poet is unlikely to think actively about the metre of his poem; instead, he is guided by his sensitive ear and poetic flair to what is most effective.

I should stress that English metre is far less rigid than Classical metre, and so you may disagree with how I have scanned certain lines. Some may assert the strict metre more; some will tend towards natural speech. Neither is really right nor wrong – though too strict and the poem becomes robotic, too loose and the poetic effects, the fireworks disappear.

To begin, a quick introduction to scansion is in order. If you would like something more detailed, I recommend Stephen Fry’s *The Ode Less Travelled*, which also contains excellent literary analysis which I may well have inadvertently picked up on the way and not attributed.

English is a stress-timed language: that is, certain syllables in each word carry more weight than others. Think of the word ‘English’ – you naturally put more emphasis on the first syllable. By contrast, you put more emphasis on the last syllable in a word like ‘within’. (Not all languages do this – French, for example, places equal emphasis on all syllables.) Stressed syllables are marked with ‘/’ above them, unstressed with ‘u’ above them.

So this line would be scanned as follows:

u / u / u / u / u /  
*Lo these were they, whose souls the Furies steel'd* (Pope)

The different sequences of stressed and unstressed syllables form the basis of English metrical schemes.<sup>1</sup>

Armed with a basic understanding of English prosody, let us begin with the most fundamental question: is a metrical scheme really necessary to write good verse? Although metrical forms constrain precisely what words a poet can use and in which order, they can liberate his expression. All the poetic effects and subtleties which I discuss below are the direct result of adhering more strictly or less to the characteristic cadences of a particular metre. It is very difficult to write good ‘free verse’. One is out in the wilderness. Some have done it, though I struggle to appreciate it. Let Wordsworth have the final word:

*In truth the prison, into which we doom  
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,  
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound*

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<sup>1</sup> Classical metres were quite different, based instead on *how long* it took to say a syllable (a product of the natural length of the vowel and adjacent consonant clusters), rather than the emphasis – in fact, it is perfectly common and even desirable in (stress-timed) Latin poetry to have stressed short syllables or unstressed long syllables. Greek, like French, had no stress-timing.

*Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground. (1)*

The effects of English prosody can be split into two categories. First, there are the essential characteristics of a metrical form. If poets slavishly followed a set pattern, however, a poem would become dull and monotonous after a few stanzas: the second category is the subversion of a regular line – an unstressed syllable where we would expect a stressed, for example. These can be tremendously effective – but only if there is a certain underlying regularity to the line which they undercut. Just as there needs to be authority for rebellion, so there needs to be regularity for subversion.

A metrical form can itself be split into two parts. First, the pattern of stress (or 'ictus') and unstress (analysed in terms of 'feet' of two or three syllables, such as the iamb, u /, and the trochee, / u); secondly, the length (the number of these feet in a line).

Broadly speaking, a long line will be grander, more stately, and move more slowly, but it is apt to break up into two smaller sections. The rhythm needs to be stressed unduly hard to keep it together. By contrast, a short line will have a certain briskness and jauntiness to it, but the rhythm can impose itself too much and become monotonous.

### **Iambic tetrameter**

This line consists of four iambic feet. An iamb is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed (u /). So a perfect iambic tetrameter would scan **u / u / u / u /**.

The iambic tetrameter's essential characteristics derive from its rising tone of iambs and briskness from its relatively short length. The *Lady of Shalott*, for example:

*On either side the river lie  
Long fields of barley and of rye,  
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;  
And thro' the field the road runs by  
To many-tower'd Camelot;  
...  
The yellow-leaved waterlily  
The green-sheathed daffodilly  
Tremble in the water chilly  
Round about Shalott.*

I have always thought this poem has a slightly eerie urgency to it, no doubt exacerbated by the almost hypnotic rhyme scheme. The clipped lines gallop along; there is a sense of rising, of being pulled forward, as the emphasis comes on the second syllable of the foot. More broadly, the iambic tetrameter is good for short or humorous poems because it moves fast and the metre asserts itself so readily; good fun can be had trying to contort words to fit. It would, however, become very tiresome for a longer poem: the *Lady of Shalott*, nineteen such stanzas in the hand of a master poet, is probably its limit.

### **Iambic hexameter**

Six iambs to a line: u / u / u / u / u /

This is a rare line in English poetry, primarily used to vary other iambic lines or to end a stanza in Spenser, for example. (A twelve syllable line called the Alexandrine is the standard line of French verse, and the iambic hexameter is sometimes called that.) Despite being iambic, it has quite the opposite effect of a tetrameter. It is slow and stately, a quality exploited to generate a sense of foreboding in *The Convergence of the Twain* (concerning the disaster awaiting the Titanic):

*And as the smart ship grew  
In stature, grace, and hue,  
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.* (Hardy)

The counterpart to this is that the line can be very sluggish. Alexander Pope mocked this in a couplet (the first line is a pentameter, the second a hexameter: notice the difference).

*A needless Alexandrine ends the song,  
That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.*

There is something which doesn't seem to work about this line in English, hence its rarity. The Hardy quoted above is one of the very few good examples I have come across.

The hexameter is not the longest line known to English verse. Tennyson wrote a poem, *Locksley Hall*, in iambic octameter catalectic (eight feet, the final missing its last syllable). This is a good demonstration of how much the underlying rhythm needs to be stressed for the line to hang together.

*When I dipt into the future far as human eye could see;  
Saw the Vision of the world and all the wonder that would be.—*

*In the Spring a fuller crimson comes upon the robin's breast;  
In the Spring the wanton lapwing gets himself another crest;*

*In the Spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish'd dove;  
In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.*

### **Iambic pentameter**

Five iambs to a line: u / u / u / u / u /

This is by some way the most common metre in English verse, for two primary reasons. First, it is close to natural English speech – Stephen Fry has noted that the voicemail message ‘I haven’t the time to take your call right now, so leave a message when you hear the tone’ makes two perfect iambic pentameters. This means it is fairly easy to write iambic pentameters – and thus to write at length and accommodate diverse turns of phrase. Similarly, its proximity to the spoken word gives it a lightness of touch well suited to long poems or speech (in plays, for example). The second reason is that it can be easily varied – a broader topic I shall discuss below. It is the perfect length: longer and it would split into two, shorter and the metre can become aggressively assertive. But what of its inherent qualities beyond versatility and simplicity? The iambic pentameter can have an epigrammatic facility, even a certain heroism of the second line echoing the first in the ‘heroic couplet’, two rhyming iambic pentameters.

*Know then thyself, presume not God to scan  
The proper study of mankind is man.*

Pope and Dryden wrote entire poems in such polished heroic couplets.

### **Anapaests and Cretics**

Anapaests are feet consisting of three syllables in the pattern uu/. Much like iambs, they have a sense of rising, of being dragged along, as the ictus comes after an unstressed syllable. The preponderance of unstressed syllables makes anapaests gallop at quite the canter, appropriately for Byron's subject-matter:

*The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,  
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;*

The latent monotony in regular iambic tetrameters is, I feel, explicit after two lines of anapaestic tetrameter. It is for this reason that Classical trisyllabic feet, for all their apparent rigidity, allowed significant latitude for variation in the form of *ancipites* (choice of long or short) or resolution (a long becoming two shorts; occasionally the opposite is permissible). In English, feet like the anapaest or the similar cretic (u / u) are suited for short descriptions of swift motion, as above, or humorous poems where the assertiveness and monotony of the beat can be positively amusing:

*There once was a young man from Lyme  
Who married three wives at a time.  
When asked, "Why a third?"  
He replied, "One's absurd,  
And bigamy, sir, is a crime!"*

That is a brief look at various English metres. More exist (the most notable omission is probably the trochaic tetrameter) but rather than tiring the reader with an unending shopping list of regular metres, it is worth discussing the other element of English prosody: *variations* in metres. For metre, like rhyme, sets up expectations which can be subtly subverted to great effect. This is perhaps where the most fruitful analysis can be made of the visceral, but otherwise inexplicable, poetic force of great verse.

A metrical scheme is a theme to be varied – there is nothing 'incorrect' about doing so. Even rigid Classical metres allowed this in the form of *ancipites*, and a poem of perfect lines would be soporific indeed. More cynically, variations are also necessary to fit certain words into a scheme – an iambic line could not otherwise begin 'never'. There are three primary forms of variation: substitution, hypermetre/catalexis, and enjambement/caesurae (the two usually come together).

Substitution is quite simply when an unstressed syllable lies in place of a stressed or vice versa – one type of foot is substituted for another. In iambic lines, the great majority of substitutions involve unexpected unstressed syllables – so common is it that one could be excused for not noticing, but on closer inspection substitution has a discernible and valuable effect. Take for example these lines from Wilfred Owen:

/ u u / u / u /

*If you could hear at every jolt, the blood*  
 u / u u u / u / u /  
*Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs*  
 u / u / u / u u u /  
*Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud*

The first line begins with a trochee (/ u; the reverse of an iamb), before reverting back to iambs, so ‘hear’ comes as the first stress after *two* unstresses. This gently but noticeably throws weight onto ‘hear’ – and with it the sounds Owen conjures are painfully amplified. Similar is pyrrhic substitution, which makes three unstresses before the ictus (a pyrrhus is two unstresses, u u; followed by an iamb, this makes u u u /). This occurs at ‘gargling from the froth-corrupted’ and ‘bitter as the cud’; the latter is particularly notable thanks to the harsh sonority of ‘cud’.

/ u u /  
*We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon*  
*How restlessly they speed and gleam and quiver,*  
*Streaking the darkness radiantly! Yet soon*  
*Night closes round, and they are lost for ever.* (Shelley, ‘Mutability’)  
 Here, the trochaic substitution before the long vowel in ‘clouds’ draws out the dreaminess of the reflective thoughts.

An alternative variation is to alter the ending of a line by adding an unstressed syllable, resulting in a hypermetric line, or to dock one (in the case of trochees, making the ending stressed), resulting in a catalectic line. Stressed endings are commonly, if clumsily, called masculine endings and unstressed feminine. The Greek numerical name remains the same – it simply counts the number of stressed syllables.

Hypermetre or feminine endings make a line end more softly, more wistfully, as at the end of Shelley’s stanza; this wistfulness and the additional length reflect the expansive sense of ‘for ever’.

Masculine endings, on the other hand, are more clipped and forceful. Keats exploited this contrast in ‘Fancy’:

*Ever let the Fancy roam*  
*Pleasure never is at home*  
  
*At a touch sweet pleasure melteth*  
*Like to bubbles when rain pelteth*

The bold, assertive statement in the first two lines are catalectic – the line is trochaic, so the catalectic form ends on an ictus. Then we revert to a normal trochaic tetrameter with its gentle feminine ending, reflecting the evanescent sense of ‘melteth’.

The last variation I shall discuss is enjambement – the running over of lines, where the slight pause naturally afforded by the line break clashes with the sense which straddles the line break. This places emphasis on the stressed syllable which either finishes or begins the enjambed lines depending on the metrical scheme. (In end-stressed iambs,

enjambement emphasises the last word of the first line, u /; in a scheme ending unstressed, enjambement emphasises the first word of the second line, / u.) Looking back at the Owen,

*If you could hear at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud*

you can see how the natural break afforded by the end of the line throws extra weight onto 'blood' even though it does not end the phrase.

In this short extract, then, Owen judiciously uses three different variations: trochaic substitution, pyrrhic substitution and enjambement, which by their subtle emphases turn what might otherwise be a banal description of violence into an evocative recitation of the horrors of war.

Enjambement also gives rise to caesura: a break in sense in the middle of the line. Regular enjambement and caesurae create a feverish, tense verse continually stumbling upon itself with persistent added emphases. Though tiring when unwisely used, this is well-suited to outbursts of emotion or indecision. Observe how caesurae, enjambed and even (purposefully) unfinished lines abound in Lady Macbeth's soliloquy:

*The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full  
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,  
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
The effect and it!*

Her febrile excitement at the thought of Duncan's death – and the disquiet she is trying to freeze – are brilliantly conveyed by the irregularity and harshness these variations can supply.

These are but a few examples of the myriad poetic effects that metrical schemes can give rise to. I hope this can be an *amuse gueule* before the great banquet that is a millennium of English poetry, an incentive to look further at the wonderful things a little upfront payment of effort to understand scansion can uncover. For ultimately the purpose of metrical schemes is to create a framework for the artist's imagination, strong enough to buttress it but not so restrictive as to crush it. Some metres work better than others; some only work in certain languages. But great poets from would not have burdened themselves with the toil of writing in metres were the effort not worth the result.