

For further details, see:

J.L. Joubert, La Poésie, Folio formes, Colin/Gallimard, 1977

R. Lewis, On Reading French Verse: A Study of Poetic Form, O.U.P., 1982

English poetry revolves around the stress accent, which is strong in this language. French poetry is very different, being based on the number of syllables per line. French does have a stress, but it is very slight. It occurs at the end of a word, and the interaction of the regular count of syllables and the stress-pattern produces the basic musical element of French poetry.

How then do we count the number of syllables in a line of French poetry? Here the basic element is the MUTE E. As its name suggests, the mute e is not sounded in normal speech. In verse, it is not quite silent, although it is not thumped out either. It may be marked by a tiny pause. It often lengthens the preceding syllable: look at the following line from Baudelaire, where the duration of each syllable during a recital has been recorded in hundredths of a second:

J'ai longtemps habité sous de vastes portiques
26 42 46 21 25 41 14 32 64 9 28 38

Valéry speaks of the mute e 'qui termine ou prolonge tant de mots par une sorte d'ombre que semble jeter après elle une syllabe accentuée.'

The mute e must be marked in some way, in order to preserve the rhythm of the verse. It is heard by the inward ear; it has been compared with the rest in music.

However, there are CASES IN WHICH THE MUTE E IS NOT SOUNDED, NOT COUNTED AS A SYLLABLE:

1. The mute e is not pronounced at the end of a line.
2. It is not sounded after a vowel in the body of a word - e.g. It would be silent in paiement.
3. It is elided when there is a following vowel or mute h. See line 7 of Théophile de Viau's 'Le Matin':

la bouche e et les naseaux ouverts.

We may count the syllables in line 2 of 'Le Matin' and determine that Théophile is using octosyllables:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Sème l'azur, l'or et l'ivoire , , ,

The final e of 'sème' is counted, as it is followed by a consonant.

The rules are bent a little for some very common endings in the body of the verse. Thus -AIENT (the imperfect and conditional of verbs), together with the present subjunctives AIENT and SOIENT, count as one syllable.

A line is normally cut by a main pause, marked by a slight stress. This pause is called the CAESURA (= cutting). In the classical line of seventeenth-century French poetry, the alexandrine, with twelve syllables, the line is divided into two equal parts, each called a hemistich (= 'half-line!'). The line also contains secondary stresses, which add to our enjoyment of the poetry but need not concern us here. We should note, however, that striking effects can be achieved by means of displacement of the caesura.

RHYME French rhyme aims to achieve similarity of sound and appearance.

The important thing to remember in French is that there are masculine rhymes and feminine rhymes. In masculine rhymes, the last syllable is sounded, as in Théophile de Viau's 'L'aurore, sur le front du jour ...' ('Le Matin'). Feminine rhymes end with a mute e.

Masculine and feminine rhymes are subdivided into three further groups: rimes suffisantes, rimes riches, rimes pauvres.

A rhyme is suffisante if the identity of sound depends upon a consonant followed by a vowel: trahison, raison; or upon a vowel followed by a consonant: mère, père - i.e. when the rhyme depends on two elements sounding the same.

A rhyme is riche if it contains THREE identical elements: mélodie, parodie.

A rhyme is pauvre when it is based on ONE identical vowel: remue, nue, salue.

In the seventeenth century, rules were evolved concerning the disposition of masculine and feminine rhymes. They had to alternate

In couplets: fem, fem, masc, masc, etc. as they do in Corneille, Racine and Molière. In this case they are called rimes plates or rimes suivies.

In rimes croisées, with a single feminine line alternating with a single masculine line, or vice versa, on the pattern abab.

Or in rimes embrassées, with two feminine lines contained within two masculine lines, or vice versa, on the pattern abba.

Essentially, the classical règle d'alternance demands that a masculine rhyme should not be followed by another, different, masculine rhyme, and similarly that a feminine rhyme should not be immediately followed by another, different, feminine rhyme. In some form, masculine and feminine must alternate. This rule doubtless stems from the wish to avoid monotony.

Sometimes a poet cannot or does not wish to contain his idea in the limits of a single line: so he flows on to the next. This device is called ENJAMBEMENT. See Racine's Phèdre, ll. 849-52:

je sais mes perfidies,
Oenone, et ne suis point de ces femmes hardies
Qui, goûtant dans le crime une tranquille paix,
Ont su se faire un front qui ne rougit jamais.

THE FRENCH SONNET contains fourteen lines which are normally grouped into two quatrains (sets of four lines) and two tercets (sets of three lines). The most regular rhyme scheme involves rimes embrassées in the quatrains, abba abba, with the two tercets following the pattern ccd ede. There is another, less classical form, in which the tercets follow the pattern ccd eed.

Normally, the two quatrains develop one idea and the two tercets produce a parallel or a contrast. Particular attention is paid to the last line, the vers de chute, which is made as dense and pithy as possible.

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