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## 2 An Introduction to Meter

**P**oetic **meter** is based on recurring units of measurement. There are four measuring systems used by poets. (1) **Quantitative verse** depends upon a consistent interplay of long and short syllables; classical meters are quantitative. (2) **Accentual verse** depends upon a consistent number of **accents** or stresses, regardless of how many unstressed syllables are around them; Old English meters are accentual. (3) **Syllabic verse** depends on a consistent number of syllables in each **line**, regardless of where the stresses happen to fall; Japanese verse often uses this meter. (4) **Accentual-syllabic verse** depends upon a consistent interplay of stressed and unstressed syllables; meter in English is primarily accentual-syllabic.

Syllables are the basic sound units in words that govern how we pronounce them. In most dictionaries, the divisions between syllables are illustrated with dots (*po•et•ry*), and the pronunciation key in parentheses after the word tells where the accents or stresses are (*pō´•ī•trē*). The primary and secondary stresses are given for longer words. For example, *pho•to•syn•the•sis* has these accent marks (*fo´•to•sin´•the•sis´*).

Accentual-syllabic meter in English is the deliberate arrangement of syllables and their stresses to achieve a particular sound effect. That is the meter we will consider in this book.

**Stress** refers to the way we pronounce our words—which syllables in a word are pronounced more emphatically than others around them, which syllables in a line are stronger than the ones around them. For example, if we look up a word like *forgotten* in the dictionary, we are told that it is pronounced like this: (*for•got´•ten*). The dominant syllable is “-got”; it is stressed. If we take a word like *haberdasher*, we will notice how the first syllables are marked: (*hab-*) stressed, (*-ber*) unstressed, (*-dash*) stressed, (*-er*) unstressed. The symbol we use to mark a strong stress is ` . An unstressed syllable is marked with a ˇ . Poets use patterns of accented and unaccented syllables to create a particular meter or to achieve a particular effect. If you look carefully at the meter of a common children’s rhyme, you will see how this works:

˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘  
 Jack and Jill went up the hill

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∪ ∩ ∪ ∩ ∪ ∩ ∪  
 To fetch a pail of water.  
 ∩ ∪ ∩ ∪ ∩ ∪ ∩ ∪  
 Jack fell down and broke his crown  
 ∪ ∩ ∪ ∩ ∪ ∩ ∪  
 And Jill came tumbling after.

In the first line, the most obvious stressed syllables are “Jack,” “Jill,” and “hill.” The only question may be about “went” versus “up.” Yet we have created such a precedent with the first three syllables that expectation forces us to keep the rhythm going. If we reversed the position of “went” and “up”—so the line read, “Jack and Jill up went the hill”—then the stress would fall on “went.” The second line is easy because the first two stresses are on large-sounding one-syllable words—“fetch,” “pail”—and the last stress on “wa-” falls predictably into place. The “fell” in the third line is a bit troublesome, but it is enclosed by stronger syllables and the singsong rhythm of the earlier lines represses it. Also, “fell down” is what linguists call a phrasal verb. This means that “down” is acting as part of the verb, as a *particle* and not a preposition. Often phrasal verbs take on idiomatic meaning beyond what the verb and preposition might mean separately. For example, “passed out” (as in a drunken coma), “called off” (as in canceling), and “took off” (as in a speedy exit) are phrasal verbs with specialized meanings, so the particles are important and can take a stress. In the line “Jack went up the hill,” the “went up” is not a phrasal verb because “up the hill” is a prepositional phrase, but in the sentence “I went up yesterday,” the “went up” is phrasal. In a book on teaching English as a second language called *The Grammar Book*, the authors note that “another formal difference between a verb + preposition and a phrasal verb is that a particle may receive stress, whereas a preposition usually doesn’t” (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999, 431). However, the metrical environment of poems has components and expectations that are absent in normal speech, so prepositions often get **metrical stresses** rather than rhetorical ones. Particles, though, can get a **rhetorical stress** (these terms are explained fully on pages 16–17).

In English, we group accented and unaccented syllables into units called **feet**. The following quick explanation will be expanded later; don’t worry if this version is not entirely clear. English poets use only seven kinds of metrical feet. The names of these feet and the patterns of accented and unaccented syllables they represent are as follows: **iamb**

(˘), **trochee** (˘˘), **anapest** (˘˘˘), **dactyl** (˘˘˘), **spondee** (˘˘), **pyrrhic** (˘˘), and **monosyllabic foot** (˘). The foot is the basic unit of measurement in a line. When we **scan** a line, we look for combinations of accented and unaccented syllables and group them into these feet. Note that the trochee is a reversed iamb, and that a dactyl is a reversed anapest. We often call the substitution of one for the other a **reversed foot**.

The two odd feet here are the monosyllabic foot and the pyrrhic. The monosyllabic foot has only one syllable, but it is understood that it is missing an unstressed syllable, much as in a contraction. When we see “I’m,” we know an “a” is missing. The monosyllabic foot frequently occurs at the beginning or end of a line. In trochaic meters, for example, it is common to find a monosyllabic foot at the end because the poet wants the line to finish strongly. Consider William Blake’s “The Tyger”: “Tyger, tyger burning bright, / In the forests of the night.” This is in trochaic **tetrameter** (lines of four trochees) and in place of the last trochee there is a single stress, a monosyllabic foot. Conversely, an iambic line can begin with a stress—either a monosyllabic foot or a spondee. The poet occasionally wants to begin a line strongly to vary the tempo.

The most problematic foot is the pyrrhic. There has been much critical debate about this foot. Some theorists maintain that it doesn’t exist, and others tend to see it frequently. One of the most basic definitions of meter is “regularly recurring stress,” and clearly a pyrrhic foot has no stress. Essentially, we find metrical stresses where many of the other critics find pyrrhics. We believe the pyrrhic is rare in English **prosody** and is most common in what we call a **super-iamb**: a pyrrhic followed by a spondee (˘˘|˘˘). Here, it is as if two iambs underwent some atomic fusion and recombined in a new way. The super-iamb occurs most often at the beginning or end of the line but is occasionally found in the middle. For a more complete discussion of the pyrrhic, see Chapter 11, “Some Fine Points.” W. B. Yeats is particularly fond of super-iambs, and they have been used effectively by William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Robert Frost. There are several examples in Yeats’s “Adam’s Curse,” found on pages 63–66.

The seven metrical feet are like metrical primary colors from which almost any metrical effect can be made. The terms we use for the feet are Latinized versions of Greek words, though Greek meter is very different from that used in English. In English, a foot is the combination of syllables that make up the basic sound units for measuring a line of verse. **Verse** comes from the Latin word “versus” meaning “a turning of the plow.” A **line** is a unit, after which the reader “re-turns” to start a new line.

We call the analysis of metrical effects **prosody**, and the marking of unaccented and accented syllables **scansion**. Greek meter was based on the duration of a syllable, and English meter is based on stress, so some of the poetic terms and assumptions that govern Greek prosody do not translate clearly into the ways we use them. A few English poets have tried to write in strict Greek meters, but when they have, the resulting poems have borne little relation to the auditory effects in Greek.

In accentual-syllabic verse, the measurement is based on the regular recurrence of stress. You must learn to recognize the seven basic feet mentioned above so that you can divide a line into these feet. When we name a line's meter, we name the predominant foot (iamb, trochee, etc.) and then name the number of such units to a line. Thus, an iambic **pentameter** line is one that consists of five feet, the majority of which are iambs. If you had three iambs to the line, then you would have iambic **trimeter**. If you had three trochees, it would still be trimeter, but now it would be called trochaic trimeter. If you had four feet, then it would be called **tetrameter**. The terms designating the number of units per line are derived from Greek and Latin numerical prefixes.

The number of feet in each line of poetry determines how we describe it. A poem whose lines have only one foot is in **monometer**; a line with two feet is called **dimeter**; three feet is called **trimeter**; four, **tetrameter**; five, **pentameter**; six, **hexameter**; seven, **heptameter**; and eight, **octameter**. Pentameter is the most common and popular of all poetic meters in English, followed by tetrameter and trimeter. There are also poems whose **stanzas** have varied line lengths. For example, a poem could have five-line stanzas, but the first line might be in pentameter, the second in tetrameter, the third in dimeter, the fourth in tetrameter, and the fifth in pentameter. Thomas Hardy was fond of creating stanzas with line lengths in odd patterns, and "Moments of Vision" is a good example; its stanzaic pattern is 1-4-2-5-2 (a monometer line, followed by tetrameter, dimeter, pentameter, and dimeter). We will be discussing these patterns more completely in Chapter 6.

One of the reasons the pentameter line is popular is that it corresponds to what we can say in a single breath. Longer lines tend to become ungainly. In his "Essay On Criticism" Alexander Pope complains about the eighteenth-century habit of ending pentameter poems with an **alexandrine** (a line with six feet, i.e., in hexameter): "A needless Alexandrine ends the song / That like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along." Pope's lines perfectly illustrate his complaint: the first line is pentameter and moves swiftly, the second is hexameter and the spondees (snake/drags and slow/length) slow it down to the speed of

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a crippled snake. This slowness, however, is more a function of the spondees in the line than of the extra foot. Even a line of trimeter can seem slow if it has two spondees in it.

Later in the same poem, Pope describes the way sounds should echo the sense a poet wishes to convey:

'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence,  
 The sound must seem an echo to the sense.  
 Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,  
 And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;  
 But when loud surges lash the sounding shore  
 The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.  
 When Ajax strives, some rock's vast weight to throw,  
 The line too labours, and the words move slow.

In an era when metrical poetry was the only kind being written, pedantic critics would measure a poet's worth by how consistent and flawless his or her meter was. This criterion was common up until the first half of the twentieth century. "Harshness" or a rough meter—meter that had many deviations from the norm, that used many **substitutions**—would offend these sticklers for regularity, and Pope is arguing that one's appreciation of meter should be more complex than mere consistency. The "sound must seem an echo to the sense," he says, and illustrates what he means in the next few lines. In Greek mythology, Zephyrus was the god personifying the gentle west wind, so if he were to enter one's poem, one would need a gentle meter; this is why Pope, in the third line, uses a trochee followed by an iamb (the effect of an anapest) and regular iambs thereafter—resulting in a soft, gentle rhythm. In the fourth line, he illustrates the harshness of waves crashing on the shore metrically, with spondees; he starts the line with an iamb, which he follows with a spondee:

˘     ˘ | ˘     ˘ | ˘     ˘ | ˘     ˘ | ˘     ˘  
 but when loud surges lash the sounding shore

The effect is three stresses in a row, and "lash" is a strong, harsh syllable as well. Of course, the **alliteration** of the "l," "s," and "sh" sounds, and the **assonance** of the "ou" sounds, also reinforce Pope's metrical choices. There are also three stresses in the subsequent line: the initial iamb is followed by a spondee and the syllables are large and mouth-filling, which makes the line discordant, makes it "roar." Not only should the physical, natural world be described with this kind of

auditory effect, but powerful human action as well. Ajax is a strong warrior in Homer's *Iliad*; when he performs some superhuman feat, the meter should match the action—the “sound” of the passage should echo the “sense” Homer wished to convey to the reader.

Besides regarding the metrical pattern in a poem to determine its form, we also look at its **rhyme scheme**. The sequencing of rhymed syllables at the ends of lines is plotted so that we can see what pattern the poet has chosen. Certain patterns are associated with the poets who frequently used them. For example, **terza rima** is written in three-line stanzas whose first and third lines rhyme, while the second line's end word becomes the first and third **rhyme** of the next stanza. This pattern is associated with Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and is also employed by Percy Bysshe Shelley in his “Ode to the West Wind”:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed . . .

We will discuss **stanza** forms later, and there is a glossary of them in the back of this book, but notice how we plot the rhyme scheme of the following poem, “Resolve,” by Mark Halperin:

The day comes when the bird <i>feeder</i>	<i>a</i>
stands empty and the fatted junco <i>settles</i>	<i>b</i>
into feathers on the branch, when no dog, <i>either</i>	<i>a</i>
young or old, will bark, and <i>kettles</i>	<i>b</i>
hold their breath. The morning <i>arrives</i>	<i>c</i>
when there's no light, when the blankets are <i>lead</i>	<i>d</i>
and vampires, call them work or the mundane in our <i>lives,</i>	<i>c</i>
guard the ways out, when I've <i>considered</i>	<i>d</i>
the clock on my shelf or in my gut, <i>flinched</i>	<i>e</i>
one more time, then marked <i>Finished</i>	<i>e</i>
to the claims of infant and parent. Let the <i>sky</i>	<i>f</i>
close, I think, were I my own, were I . . .	<i>f</i>
So, like the poor, I atone for the <i>sins</i>	<i>g</i>
I couldn't commit, and my resolve, of itself, <i>softens.</i>	<i>g</i>

This poem starts out like a Shakespearean **sonnet** with an alternating (*ababcdcd . . .*) pattern of rhyme, but it switches in the tenth line

to **couplets**. The meter is also loose and variable; it seems to fluctuate between a four- and a five-stress line. Note that the rhymes are not “full” or complete; they often depend on subtler sound connections, which is typical of the twentieth-century poem, in which poetic effects are more often disguised than made apparent. Because this poem is rhymed and has fourteen lines, we would call it a sonnet; because its rhyme scheme has such strong connections to the Shakespearean sonnet (even to the couplet at the end), yet takes off on its own, and its meter is so variable, we can easily identify it as a modern sonnet. It is best to plot the rhyme scheme of several stanzas so that you are sure of the pattern. Had we plotted only the first eight lines here, we would not have known that Halperin altered the typical pattern.

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