

Talking about Poetry: Meter

Scansion means analyzing a passage of verse to determine its *meter*, which generally refers to a line's *type of foot* and *number of feet per line*.

Types of feet:

- 1) **Iambic:** a light syllable followed by a stressed syllable
Ex. The cur few tolls the knell of parting day.
- 2) **Anapestic:** two light syllables followed by a stressed syllable (think the sound of horses hooves)
Ex. The Asyrlian came down like a wolf on the fold.
- 3) **Trochaic:** a stressed followed by a light syllable
Ex. There they are, my fifty men and women
- 4) **Dactylic:** a stressed syllable followed by two light syllables
Ex. Eve, with her basket, was
Deep in the bells and grass.

Rising meter: strong stress is at the end (iambs and anapests)

Falling meter: strong stress is at the beginning (trochees and dactyls)

Duple meter: contains two syllables (iambs and trochees)

Triple meter: contains three syllables (anapests and dactyls)

Occasional variants from these four standard types of feet:

- 5) **Spondaic:** two successive syllables with approximately equal strong stresses
Ex. Good strong thick stuffy in cense smoke. (1st two feet)
- 6) **Pyrrhic:** two successive syllables with approximately equal light stresses
Ex. My way is to begin with the beginning (2nd and 4th feet)

Naming metric lines according to number of feet per line:

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|--------------------|------------|--------------------|--|
| Monometer: | one foot | Pentameter: | five feet |
| Dimeter: | two feet | Hexameter: | six feet (<i>Alexandrine</i> = a line of six iambic feet) |
| Trimeter: | three feet | Heptameter: | seven feet |
| Tetrameter: | four feet | Octameter: | eight feet |

Other ways of describing meter (using the first five lines of Keat's *Endymion*):

--**feminine ending:** describes a line that ends with an unstressed syllable (lines 1, 2, 5)

--**masculine ending**: describes a line that ends with a stressed syllable (lines 3, 4)

-- **end-stopped**: describes a line that ends at a natural pause in the reading, such as the end of a sentence, clause or other syntactic unit (lines 1,5)

--**enjambement** (run-on lines): describes a line that ends in an incompleting syntactic unit, so that it forces the reader to push into the next line (lines 2 through 4)

--**caesura**: a strong phrasal pause within a line (lines 2, 3, 4)

- 1 A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
- 2 Its lovelyness in creases; it will never
- 3 Pass into nothingness, but still will keep
- 4 A bowler quiet for us, and a sleep
- 5 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

Non-stress-based meter

Strong-stress meter: only the beat of the strong stresses counts in the scanning; number of unstressed syllables is highly variable. In Old English (and some Middle English) poetry, lines usually had four stresses that were emphasized by alliteration and often by medial caesura (known as *alliterative verse*).

Ex. In a somer seson, whan soft was the sonne,
I shope me in shroudes, as I a shepe were,
In habits like an heremite, unholy of works,
Went wyde in this world, wonders to here.

Spring rhythm: a type of strong-stress verses invented by Gerard Hopkins in the late nineteenth century. Each foot begins with a stressed syllable and may contain from one to three light syllables. Number of light stresses is highly variable, and strong stresses are strikingly offset between lines.

Ex. The sour scythe cringe, and the bleak share come.
Our hearts' charity hearth's fire, our thoughts' chivalry's throng's Lord.

Free verse: lines have no or only occasional metric feet or uniform stress patterns. ¹

¹Quoted and paraphrased from M. H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993), pp. 113-117.