Scansion Rules, Rhyme Drools [aka *The Latin Meter Handout*]

As you may have heard, Roman poetry was written according to rhythm, not rhyme. The rhythm of poetry was not a matter of personal taste. Instead, Roman poets would mimic the styles and rules of Greek poetry that had been developed centuries earlier. There were many styles or systems for arranging the words so that the syllables fit the meter. Here, you will mainly learn about **Dactylic Hexameter**, the meter of epic stories like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

This handy worksheet is intended as a primer to give your scansion a good foundation. A line is either correctly scanned or incorrectly scanned (sorry, creative people, scansion doesn't have much wiggle room). Roman poets were creative about a lot of things, but they would NEVER have published something that scanned incorrectly. If your scansion derails, go back to the basics to find out why. Don't assume the error is in the Latin because it seldom is.

Dactylic Hexameter Means:

• A dactyl is a finger. Look how there is a long part followed by two short parts on an average finger (if your finger doesn't look like this go find a Greek or Roman finger). Ironically, the word dactyl is being used to describe a poetic 'foot' which is an arrangement of a long syllable followed by two short syllables (or, a long syllable followed by another long syllable...but please read on).

dactyl

- Each line of *dactylic* (fingerlike) *hexameter* (measured into 6) consists of 6 'feet' as you can see in the illustration below.
- Each foot will be either a dactyl (long-short-short) or a spondee (long-long)
 - The poet will mix and match these two options throughout the 6 feet in a line of dactylic hexameter for rhythmic effect but keep reading: there are a few more rules to learn before you start:
- 1. The last foot (the anceps) always consists of two syllables so mark it so immediately. You can regard the very last syllable as an unknown vowel length and mark it as an X (it will normally be pronounced long no matter what)
- 2. The second to last foot is almost always a dactyl so mark it so immediately
- 3. The first syllable of every line of poetry is long no-matter-what so mark it so immediately.
- 4. The **thesis** (first syllable) of a foot is always long
- 5. The **arsis** (the second half) of a foot will either be one long or two shorts: there can be no mixing and matching in the second half of the foot.



But wait! There's more! you must predict if a syllable is long or short:

Long by Position (aka: the syllable is long no matter what)

- Syllables that precede double consonants (except for cr, pr, tr, & combinations with h—these
 are treated like a single consonant for scansion considerations)
- A syllable that immediately follows a dactyl (the first syllable of a foot is always long)
- The first syllable of every line
- The last syllable of every line

Long by Nature include...

- Case endings that are ALWAYS long (like 1st decl. ablative singular –ā, or dative plural of the 1st and 2nd declension –īs, etc.)
- Use your dictionary: natural long syllables are MARKED in Cassell's
- Diphthongs (ae, oe, ei, ui, au, eu as in saepe)

Short by Nature include...

- Case endings that are ALWAYS short (ie. 1st decl. nominative singular -a.)
- Use your dictionary: natural short syllables are not marked in Cassell's
- Things that are short by nature can be considered long if placed in the final syllable of the final foot.

Remember 'Syllabification' (how to break words into syllables)

- Syllables are divided **between a vowel and a single consonant**: **vi-rum**, not **vir-um**. (Latin follows the consonant first followed by vowel rule).
 - o In the event that the case ending ends with a consonant, include it in the last syllable:
 - Notice the break is vi-rum for virum
- If a vowel is followed by two consonants in the same word, the division comes **between the consonants**: **ar-ma**, not **arm-a** or **a-rma**.

Elision

There are circumstances when the end of one word is 'smashed' into the beginning of another when pronouncing the Latin (ALL of Classical Latin was written to be spoken aloud). This is predictable and intentional. You must to figure out where syllables *elide* or you'll get the meter wrong (though, to be honest, occasionally a poet will ignore the rules of elision). The *quantity* of the second vowel decides the length of the 'smooshed' bit. Let me show you what I mean:

You have elision ...

- If a word ends with a vowel and the next word begins with a vowel or an 'h'
 - 'Foribusque excedere' would be pronounced
 "foribusqu'excedere" or fo-ri-bus-quex-ce-de-re
 - The letters –queex- counts as only one syllable.
 - o nauta est would be pronounced "now test" and would count as only TWO syllables instead of three.
- If a word ends with an -m and the next word begins with a vowel or an 'h'
 - o 'Quantum erat' is pronounced "quant'erat" or quan-ter-at
 - nautam est is pronounced "now tamst"

Start with the known, finish with the unknown (think of scansion like a game of Sudoku and you will like it better):

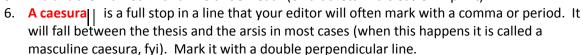
- 1. Mark the last foot as a spondee (long-long or long-X)
- 2. Mark the fifth foot a dactyl (long-short-short)
- 3. Look for any elisions and mark them underneath with a long line.
- 4. Mark the first syllable of each line of poetry long.
- 5. Mark syllables that are long by position or nature
- 6. Now you must mark what's left. If you get stuck, look in the dictionary for clues about naturally long or short syllables if you get stuck.

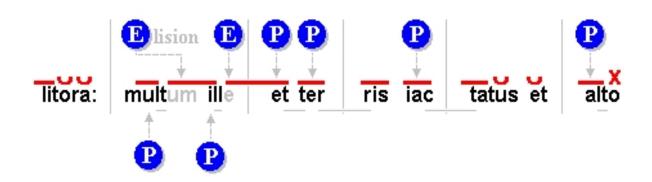
arma vi rumque ca no, Troi ae qui primus ab oris

What are the marks supposed to look like?

- 2. Long syllables are marked with a line: -
- 3. Short syllables with: *
- Divisions between feet are marked with a long perpendicular line: |







Try it:

Pyramus et Thisbe, iuvenum pulcherrimus alter, [55] altera, quas Oriens habuit, praelata puellis, contiguas tenuere domos, ubi dicitur altam coctilibus muris cinxisse Semiramis urbem. notitiam primosque gradus vicinia fecit, tempore crevit amor; taedae quoque iure coissent, [60] sed vetuere patres: quod non potuere vetare, ex aequo captis ardebant mentibus ambo.

Fold and hide the answers below:

Check it: The first 4 lines we will do in class. Here are the last four lines:

Want to know more about scansion? Read on:

Latin Meter (the erudite version)

Overview

Meter is the "measure" or rhythm of poetry. In English poetry, meter is based on the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, e.g. this example from Shakespeare (sonnet 18) in iambic pentameter:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

And summer's lease hath all too short a date...

In contrast, the meter of Latin poetry is **quantitative**. It is based on the quantity, or *length*, of syllables, (determined mainly by the length of the vowels in any given syllable). A line of Latin verse, then, will be composed of sequences of long and short syllables.

The basic building block of a line of poetry is a **foot**, a particular sequence of long and short syllables that varies depending on the type of verse being composed. A common type of foot is the **dactyl** (long-short-short). If we compose a line of poetry with six dactyls, we'll be using a meter known as **dactylic hexameter**. (These meters were inherited from Greek poetry, and so the names are Greek: **dactyl** is from the word for "finger;" hex is the word for "six," so **hexameter** means "six measures."

The basic pattern of the dactylic hexameter may be written as follows, with long syllables marked as and short syllables as:

When we figure out the meter of a line or passage of poetry, we say that we're **scanning** the poetry or figuring out its scansion. This process basically involves determining which syllables are long and short and seeing how the syllables are organized into feet. Additional factors that need to be considered in scansion are **elision**, when vowels at the end of a word are absorbed into the vowel beginning the next word in the line; **substitution**, when a long syllable is used in place of two short syllables; and **caesura**, a slight pause that occurs in the middle of a verse.

Quantity (length) of syllables

All syllables are either long or short.

A syllable is long if:

- It contains a vowel that is long by nature, like the ablative ending of *puellā* or the first-person singular ending of *canō*.
 - Of course, we find long vowels in other places besides case and verb endings, e.g. the long i in ruīna.
 - Dipthongs (combinations of two vowels pronounced as one sound—ae, au, ei, eu, oe, and ui) are long by nature.

- If it contains a vowel that is followed by two (or more) consonants, making it long by position.
 - e.g. the first syllable of arma. The first a is short, but is followed by two consonants, which makes that syllable long by position (sometimes called "making position").

This rule applies even if one or both of the following consonants are in the following word. So with e.g. dabit deus the i in dabit, which is naturally short, becomes long by position because of the following two consonants—t from dabit and d from deus. Note that x and z count as double consonants and thus will make vowels long by position.

An exception to the double consonant rule: when the first consonant is a mute (b, c, d, g, p, or t) and the second consonant is a liquid (I, m, n, or r), the preceding vowel need not become long by position. E.g. the first syllable of sacrum, in which the a is short by nature, may be either long or short as the meter requires, because the first consonant after the is a mute, c, and the second is a liquid, r. Another exception: qu counts as a single consonant. qu and su count as single consonants when the u is pronounced as a consonant (e.q. suavis, which is pronounced as "swa-wis").

Note also that i is sometimes a consonant, usually at the beginning of a word (iacio, ieci), or after the prefix on a compound word (adiectus, conieci).

If neither #1 or #2 applies, the syllable is short.

Elision

Elision is the running together of two syllables. It occurs when a word that ends in a vowel, dipthong, or vowel + m (i.e., -am, -em, -im, -om, -um) is followed by a word beginning with a vowel or the letter h. In these cases, the final sound of the first word is elided and is neither pronounced nor scanned as part of the line. For instance, Aeneid 1.5:

multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem (pronounce "quoqu'et")

Or, for a more complex example, *Aeneid* 1.3:

lītora, multum ille et terrīs iactātus et altō (pronounce "mult' ill' et")

Prodelision: a slightly different type of elision occurs when a word ending in a vowel, dipthong, or *-um* is followed by the word est. This type of elision is called prodelision. In these cases, the e of est is elided, e.g. multum est (pronounce "multum'st")

Substitution

As noted in section I above, the basic scheme of the dactylic hexameter is as follows:

Notice that the last foot isn't a dactyl, but has a long syllable followed by a syllable that can be long or short (marked as x). This syllable is known as a syllabaanceps (a "syllable that can go either way").

If every line had this exact sequence of longs and shorts the rhythm would be monotonous. So in the first four feet, a long syllable can be used in place of two short syllables, giving us a foot called a

spondee (long – long) in place of the dactyl (long – short – short). So we actually have a scheme as follows:

The fifth foot of a dactylic hexameter line is almost always a dactyl, but on occasion it will be a spondee. When this happens the entire line can be referred to as **spondaic**.

Caesura

Caesura (literally, "a cutting") refers to a slight pause that occurs in the reading of a verse. It often coincides with a pause in the sense of the sentence. In dactylic hexameter, the two most common caesurae are:

- The masculine caesura. This occurs after the first syllable of the third foot, e.g. arma virumque canō, "Troiae quī prīmus ab ōrīs
- The feminine caesura occurs between the two short syllables of the third foot, e.g. O passī graviōra " dabit deus hīs quoque finem

Other Feet and Meters

Greek in origin:

- lam lambic Trimeter (short, long)
 - Used by the Greeks for speaking passages
 - o Three feet: Thre
- **Trochee** Trochaic Meter (long, short)
 - Used for an agitated chant
 - o - | - | | - | - - |
- Anapest Anapestic Meter (short, short, long)
 - Anapest is a meter associated with marching.
 - o A line works like this:

Elegiac Couplet

The six foot dactylic line used in epic poetry by Greek and Latin poets was known as an hexameter. When followed by a line of dactylic pentameter (line with five feet instead of 6), the couplet was called an elegiac couplet.

Hendecasyllabic verse: spondee | dactyl | trochee | trochee | trochee