

An Introduction to Latin Verse

Contents

Introduction	2
Long and short syllables	2
Stress	3
The Hexameter	4
The Caesura	5
Elision	5
A final 'm'	5
Stress and quantity in classical Latin verse	6
Greek words in Latin	7
Elegiac couplets	7
Hendecasyllabics	8
Was classical Latin poetry spoken or sung?	8
Post-classical Latin verse	8
Appendix 1: Some characteristic quantities	9
Appendix 2: Quantities of final syllables	10

Introduction

There are a number of things you need to become more familiar with if you want to recreate the sound of Latin and in particular of Latin verse:

- the sounds of individual letters and letter combinations [see the separate document also available online: *The Pronunciation of Classical Latin*]
- the principle of quantity, i.e. long and short vowels, and long and short syllables
- how words were stressed
- the regular metres and rhythmic patterns of poetry
- and the meaning of the Latin words you are reading

Long and short syllables

The building stones of classical verse are the words and in particular their syllables: some syllables are ‘long’ others are ‘short’. You need to distinguish between long and short syllables and long and short vowels.¹ There is a connection between the two: if the syllable has a long vowel the syllable must also be long.

The length of a vowel or a syllable is called its ‘quantity’. Some scholars refer to long and short syllables as ‘heavy’ or ‘light’ syllables to distinguish them from long and short vowels.²

A syllable is long if

- the vowel is long (unless the vowel is lost in an elision—see ‘Elision’ below);
- it contains two vowels run together as a diphthong (**audire**, **deinde**, but not **deus**, which is two syllables);
- it contains a short vowel followed immediately by two consonants, even if one or both consonants are part of the following word; but note:
 - where a short vowel is followed by two consonants of which the second is **l** or **r**, the syllable may be long or short (e.g. **patris**).
 - where a double **l** or **r** follows a vowel, however, the syllable is always long (**currus**, **flagellum**)
 - an **h** has no consonantal value (and **ch**, **ph**, **rh** and **th** are treated as single consonants)
 - **qu** does not ‘make position’, i.e. act as two consonants
 - an **x** has the value of two consonants and therefore does make position.

Exercise

Show the long syllables by adding a line above them, e.g. **omnibus**, **prīmus**

¹ For more on long and short vowels, and pronunciation in general, see *The Pronunciation of Classical Latin* available alongside this document.

² ‘Heavy’ and ‘light’ syllables have not gained widespread recognition, perhaps because of the suggestion of weight or emphasis (i.e. stress), which quantity should not imply.

arma virumque canō
ōrātiōnem audīvimus
exeunt omnēs
Camilla linqūbat habēnās
silva spīnōsa
puer ēgregius est Caesar

Stress

In addition to having a long or short quantity, a syllable may or may not be stressed. The rule for stressing Latin words is similar to the pattern of stress in English. Stress the second last syllable if it is a long syllable, but if the second last syllable is short, then stress the third last syllable:

amābit	<i>s/he will love</i>
relinquit	<i>s/he abandons</i>
dominus	<i>master, lord</i>
mīlitēs	<i>soldiers</i>

Words of only two syllables should have the first syllable stressed, even if it is short, but lightly (ērat).

Some polysyllabic words have two stresses (again as in English: *information*):

amāvērunt	<i>they have loved</i>
------------------	------------------------

The pluperfect of the same verb (**amāverant** = *they had loved*) is subtly different. On the page the difference lies in one vowel. But because of the change in quantity, the stress moves back a syllable to create a perceptibly different sound to the ear.³

In this line from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* [8.187], the verb is used twice, first in the present subjunctive (*he may possess*) then in the indicative (*he does possess*)

omnia possideat, nōn possidet āera Mīnos

The stressing and therefore the sounds of **possideat** and **possidet** are quite different.

The changes in the number of syllables and in quantity affected the stressing, and will have created some subtle variations in sound which were important to the meaning of the spoken language; whereas the value of inflexion (word-endings), which point the meaning on the page, tended to diminish in the spoken language.

Exercise

³ We have something similar in English, e.g. *economy* and *economical*, *history* and *historical*.

Say aloud these words:

puella	intereā	asperitās frīgorum abest
monēre	mulier	carpe diem
mittere	mulieris	cucullus
in aquā	quaesierīs	cuculus

Return to the previous exercise (**arma virumque canō**, etc), and underline the syllables which should be stressed

Scholars have not always agreed over the presence of stress in Latin. There do remain grey areas over how heavily or lightly words should be stressed, over individual words, and how the stress altered with inflexional change. Nonetheless the most telling argument in favour of a stress system similar to our own is the rule of coincidence of stress (weight of breath) and ictus (first long syllable of a foot) in the final two feet of a hexameter⁴. With so few exceptions it happens too much for the coincidence to be an accident.

The Hexameter

The hexameter is so called because the line is divided into six ‘feet’ not unlike musical bars (*hex* is Greek for six). The scheme below represents the hexameter (— for a long syllable, ∪ a for short one):

— ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | — || ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | — ∪

The line does not contain a fixed number of syllables, for there are variables: two short syllables for a second long syllable in any of the first four feet. There are, however, certain fixtures (e.g. the first syllable of each foot and the entire fifth foot; and short syllables always come in pairs, except for the final syllable of the line).

There are two ways to learn the rhythms of classical Latin verse. One, listen to someone read it, copy and commit a few lines to memory; then see how well you manage with some unprepared lines: repeat until you can feel the rhythm almost at sight. The other is to study how the verse is put together, syllable by syllable, line by line. At some point you will need to try both.

When you are ‘scanning’ a line, i.e. breaking down the line into six feet, with long and short syllables, start with the final two feet (five syllables), which are fixed.

This metre is used by almost all the poets. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* and Juvenal’s *Satires* are all in hexameters.⁵

⁴ See below: ‘Stress and quantity in classical Latin verse’.

⁵ The hexameter is also the first line of the elegiac couplet (see below).

The Caesura

The mark || represents a caesura, or a ‘cutting’ (a break) between two words. This sometimes (but not always) coincides with a pause in the sense. Nine out of ten caesuras come after the first (long) syllable of the third foot. Occasionally it will appear in the fourth or second foot, or both, or even rarer, after the first short syllable (i.e. second syllable) of a foot.

The caesura will help you scan a line, a kind of stepping-stone as you find your way: if a word ends after the first syllable of the third foot then that is a clue to what is going on around it. It will help you, no pun intended, to find your feet.

The role of the caesura is to avoid a division between words coinciding with a break between feet, which would generate a plodding and monotonous rhythm. The caesura ensures that the words straddle the beat, particularly at this point in the line where it is gathering momentum.

omnia possideat, nōn possidet āēra Mīnos.

Minos may possess all things, but he does not possess the air

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.187

— u u | — u u | — || — | — u u | — u u | — u
om ni a possi de at, nōn possidet ā ē ra Mīnos.

Elision

If a word ends with a vowel or **m** and the next begins with a vowel or **h**, the last syllable of the first word is elided, forming a single syllable. The sound of the syllable gives way to the following one. It is not entirely lost but ‘glided’ (as the ancients themselves said) with the sound of the second:

ī, sequere Ītaliā ventīs, pete rēgna per undās.

go, make for Italy with (the help of) the winds, seek the lands over the waves.

Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.381

— u u | — u u | — || — | — u u | — u u | — —
ī, se quer (e) Ī ta li am ven tīs, pe te rēgna per undās.

The letters **u** and **i** (**gemitū**, **patrī**) are subject to elision, unless they are used as consonants (**uincere**, **iam**).

A final ‘m’

In classical poetry a final **m** before a word beginning with a vowel has no consonantal value, or at least not enough to prevent the whole syllable being elided before a word starting with a vowel or ‘h’. When you meet a Latin word ending **-m**, say it without

closing your lips on the final sound. In poetry the whole final syllable is subject to elision:

— — | — — || ∪ ∪ | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — —
 quid tant(um) īnsānō iuvat indulgēre dolōrī?
What help is it to yield so much to your demented grief?

Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.776

The classical Latin final ‘m’ was most likely in the throes of fading from the language (e.g. **septem**, *seven*, emerges in Romance languages in mildly different forms, but none with a final **-m**: **sept**, **sete**, etc) The final **-m** in medieval Latin poetry, however, was not elided. This appears to be a more complete sound, no doubt consolidated by pupils who were called upon to enunciate the difference between **puella** and the accusative **puellam**.

Note that the **i** of **īnsānō** above is a vowel, but the **i** of **iuvat** is a consonant and hence no elision of the preceding **o**.

Stress and quantity in classical Latin verse

Each syllable is either long or short. This is nothing to do with the force of breath (i.e. stress), loudness, tone or pitch, but simply the length of time it takes to utter the syllable. The arrangement of these long and short syllables provides the structure of a hexameter. However, natural word-stresses (‘) come into play too:

‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘
 — — | — — || ∪ ∪ | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — —
 quid tant(um) īnsānō iuvat indulgēre dolōrī?
What help is it to yield so much to your demented grief?

The counterpoint of the two, of natural word-stress and long/short syllables is a distinctive feature of classical rhythms. The metres, including the hexameter, were almost all Greek in origin; the stress was native Italian. Latin was a ‘heavier’ language than Greek, an impression created by the greater number of long syllables. Word-stress, if only light, relieves and invigorates the sound, preventing it from becoming ponderous.

In the first four feet stresses occur on either long or short syllables. The final two feet of a hexameter have a fixed pattern: there is almost always a stress on the first (long) syllable of the fifth foot and the first (long) syllable of the sixth. This lends a resolution to the line which gathers a rhythm of its own as you read several lines together.

Exercise

Mark the quantities, feet, caesura and stresses to these lines:

omnia possideat, nōn possidet āēra Mīnos.

ī, sequere Ītaliā ventīs, pete rēgna per undās.

Hendecasyllabics

Catullus and Martial were both fond of this metre. Each line has eleven syllables (*hendeca* is Greek for eleven):

⏟ ⏟ — ∪ ∪ — ∪ — ∪ — ⏟

cēnābis bene, mī Fabulle, apud mē
you will dine well, Fabullus, at my place

Catullus, *Poems* 13.1

‘ ‘ ‘ ‘
 — — — ∪ ∪ — ∪ — ∪ — —
 cē nā bis be ne, mī Fa bull (e), ap ud mē

Was classical Latin poetry spoken or sung?

No one really knows. An ancient recording would be a wonderful thing, but even so it might not distinguish between speaking and singing, to our ears at least: the quantitative rhythms are themselves musical, already halfway between speech and song. The ancient Greek bard was described as a ‘singer’, and the subclassical Hellenistic poets speak of the ‘song’ and ‘lyre’. However, these were not to be taken literally, at least not in the case of the later Hellenistic scholar-poets, for whom ‘song’ had become a conventional term.

Most Romans experienced poetry by hearing it. It was performed by skilled actors or readers, who used their voices, faces and bodies to bring the verses alive. This idea of performance cannot be overemphasized, and it is safe to assume that music in some form (pipes, stringed instruments) was never far away.

Post-classical Latin verse

As with the language itself, Latin verse went two ways: the academic channel which sought to retain the theory of versifying, in particular the metre (e.g. students at Oxford University are still expected to produce hexameters with the right quantities); and the more spontaneous tradition, for example the influence on versifiers of popular stress-based rhythms of early church music. Medieval poets were themselves influenced by their own vernaculars, and—with one or two notable exceptions—dropped quantity in favour of word-stress and rhyming.⁶

⁶ French is an exception. Even today some French readers of classical Latin poetry ignore the stress, in line with their own poetry, which tends to be more ‘syllabic’, i.e. they produce a much smoother, more even weighting of the syllables. Our stress-based accentuation of Latin was thought by French scholars to be a plodding Germanic disruption of their ancestral tongue. They even formed a society to protect their pronunciation of Latin – ‘La Société des amis de la prononciation française du Latin’.

Appendix 1: Some characteristic quantities

Short final -ă

nominative singular of the 1st declension: **puellă**
all neuter plurals: **vīnă, carmină, tempora**

Long final -ā

ablative singular of the 1st declension: **puellā**

Infinitives of the 2nd conjugation (long ē) and 3rd conjugation (short ĕ):

monēre *to advise, to warn* [2nd conjugation]
mittĕre *to send* [3rd conjugation]

Note also the ‘poetic’ 3rd person perfect plural: **amavĕre** for **amāvĕrunt**, **posuĕre** for **posuĕrunt**, etc; useful if the poet wanted to avoid the final syllable making position (**-unt**) and so keep it short

With some verbs, a short vowel in the present tense lengthens in the perfect:

fŭgit <i>s/he escapes</i>	fŭgit <i>s/he (has) escaped</i>
iŭvat <i>s/he helps</i>	iŭvit <i>s/he (has) helped</i>
lăvat <i>s/he washes</i>	lăvit <i>s/he (has) washed</i>
vĕnit <i>s/he comes</i>	vĕnit <i>s/he came (has come)</i>
vĭdet <i>s/he sees</i>	vĭdit <i>s/he saw (has seen)</i>

Long final -ēs

All 3rd declension plurals: **patrēs**
All 5th declension nouns, singular and plural: **fidēs, diēs**
2nd person singular of verbs, indicative or subjunctive: **monēs, amēs**

Only a few exceptions with -ēs, e.g. some (not all) 3rd declension nouns in the nominative singular: **hospēs, equēs, milēs**; and **ēs** (*you are*)

Long final -īs

All dative and ablative plurals: **puellīs, bonīs, nōbīs**
2nd person of 4th conjugation in the present tense: **audīs**
Occasional 3rd declension ending in place of -es in the accusative plural:
artīs, nāvīs, ignīs, dēmentīs, fulgentīs
vīs, whether noun (*force, violence*) or verb (*you wish*)

Short final -is

2nd person of 3rd and 5th conjugations in the present tense: **mittīs, capiīs**
3rd declension nominative and genitive singular: **cīvīs, omnīs, Cicerōnīs**

Long final -ās

1st declension accusative plural: **puellās, bonās**
2nd person singular of verbs, indicative or subjunctive: **amās, capiās, mittĕbās, audiverās**

See the Appendix 2 for a more detailed list of final long and short final syllables.

Appendix 2: Quantities of final syllables

Certain final syllables are consistently long or short. The quantities apply to all words that belong to the declensions or conjugations of the examples given:

<i>ending</i>	LONG	SHORT
-a	abl.sing., 1 st decl.: silvā imperative: festinā!	nom.sing., 1 st decl.: silva all neuter nom. and acc. plurals: vīna , tempora , corpora , nōmina
-ae	nom. pl.: puellae	
-as	acc. pl. 1 st decl.: silvās all 2nd persons: amās , amābās	
-e	abl.sing., 5 th decl.: rē , diē , fidē a few adverbs: dignē all superlative adverbs: optimē imperative: sedē!	voc.sing., 2 nd decl.: ō amice abl.sing., 3 rd decl. patre most adverbs: facile , bene , male
-es	nom.pl./acc. pl., 3 rd decl.: patrēs most 2nd persons: monēs , regēs	2 nd person of sum , esse : es
-i	gen.sing./nom.pl., 2 nd decl.: annī voc.sing., 2 nd decl. ō Claudī dat. sing. 3 rd decl.: patrī 1 st person perfect: amāvī	nisi , mihi , tibi , sibi , ibi , ubi (the final i of all these may be long or short)
-is	all dat.pl. & abl.pl.: silvīs , vinīs 3 rd decl. acc.pl. (<i>occas.</i>): omnīs 2 nd person, 4 th conjug.: audīs 2 nd person, perf. subj.: fuērīs 2 nd person of volō , velle : vīs	patris (gen.sing., 3 rd decl.) omnis (nom./gen.) 3 rd & 5 th conjugations mittis , capis 2 nd pers. fut perf.: fuēris
-o	2nd decl.dat./abl.sing.: annō , vīnō amō , moneō , mittō , audiō , capīō	ego , homo , modo (<i>occas. modō</i>) 1st person -ō shortens to -o by the time of Juvenal i.e. amō , etc.
-os	acc.pl., 2 nd decl.: annōs	
-u	abl.sing., 4th decl.: manū , gemitū	
-us	gen.sing. & nom.pl. & acc.pl. of 4th declension nouns: gemitūs	nom. sing., 2nd decl.: annus nom.sing., 4th decl.: gemitus nom.sing./acc.sing., 3rd decl.: tempus