Notes on poetic metres
The Complete Latin Course

See the final page below for metres which appear in the course readings.

There are many poetic metres[1], all taken from the highly influential canon of Greek poetry and reworked in Latin. The most used of these in Latin poetry by a distance is the ‘hexameter’. Virgil used nothing else (that we know of), likewise Lucretius, Lucan and Juvenal. The majority of Ovid’s verses are in hexameters and Catullus employed this metre for his longer poems. Horace’s Epistles and his Satires are in hexameters, although his Odes were composed in a variety of shorter ex-Greek lyric metres for which he claimed everlasting fame.[2]

The basic unit of a metre is the syllable, which may be either ‘long’ or ‘short’. A metre is an arrangement of long and short syllables in a particular pattern or scheme.

Long and short syllables

The idea of syllabic quantity is introduced on p. 353 in the book, along with the principle of stress (p. 354). This is important for a reading of classical Latin verse. Remember that the ‘length’ of the syllable has nothing to do with emphasis or stress, but simply represents its duration, the time taken to say it—not dissimilar to crotchets and quavers of musical notation. A syllable in poetry is regarded as long if …

- it contains a long vowel (in this course, a vowel with a macron)
- a short vowel is followed by two or more consonants (which may belong to the following word, e.g. the second syllable of **iubet** in **iubet pārēre** is long because the short **e** is followed by a **t** then a **p**)
- it contains a diphthong (where two vowels are run together to create one syllable, e.g. **deinde**, **heu**, **puellae**, **auferō**; but not all vowel pairings are diphthongs (**puellae**, **deus**, **alia** and others are disyllabic).
- a short vowel is followed by an ‘**x**’ (the sound ‘ks’ has the value of two consonants)

Note also:

- 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**); but where a double **l** or **r** follows a vowel the syllable is always long (**currus**, **flagellum**)
- an **h** has no consonantal value at the beginning of a word

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[1] Spelt ‘meters’ in USA.
[2] Odes 3.30.

- **ch**, **ph**, **rh** and **th** are treated as single consonants
- **qu** is treated as a single consonant
- an **i** may be a consonant (**i̲am**) or vowel **mi̲hi̲**, **ī̲rātus**; likewise a **u** (**u̲irum**), although in this course and in many texts the consonantal **u** is written as a **v** (**v̲irum**)
- the first syllable of words like **eius**, **cuius**, **huius**, **peior** and **maior** are treated as long as these words once had a double 'i' (**eiius**)

The hexameter

The hexameter is so called because the line is divided into six feet (*hex* is Greek for six). The — indicates a long syllable, ∪ a short one:

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

The hexameter 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 to help you to scan a hexameter ('scan' means fit the metre to the line):

- the last five syllables (i.e. the 5th and 6th feet) are fixed but for the variable final syllable
- short syllables always come in pairs, except for the final syllable of the line
- the first syllable of each foot is always long

— ∪ ∪ |— ∪ ∪|— ∪ ∪|— ∪ ∪| — ∪ ∪| — ∪
sed fugit intereā, fugit irreparābile tempus
But time is escaping meanwhile, irretrievable time is escaping. [22.1]

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. The majority of caesuras come after the first (long) syllable of the third foot of a hexameter. 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 never appears between two feet as that would defeat its purpose. Its role is to prevent a plodding dislocated rhythm that would arise from all the word-breaks coinciding with the divisions between the feet. With the help of the caesura the words straddle the beat, particularly at this point as the line gathers momentum.

— ∪ ∪ |— ∪ ∪|—|| ∪ ∪|— ∪ ∪| — ∪ ∪| — ∪
sed fugit intereā, fugit irreparābile tempus

The caesura will help you scan a line, a kind of stepping-stone as you find your way: if you know that a break between words is likely 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.

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 pronounced so lightly that it does not count as a syllable in a metrical scheme. When reading you fade or glide the sound of the final vowel into the initial syllable of the following word:

— ∪ ∪| — ∪∪|— ||—|— ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — —
ī, sequer(e) Ītaliam ventīs, pete rēgna per undās.
Go, make for Italy with the help of the winds, seek the territories across the waves. [3.11]

It is not an equal loss of sound. The following vowel (e.g. the **Ī** of Ītaliam) keeps its sound almost entirely in tact. There are a few very common words where the reverse happens and the sound of the second vowel gives way to the first, e.g. **est**:

nunc Rōma (e)st
now it is Rome [13.14]

The rule of elision is applied to poetry, not to prose. However, in natural speech, words will have been run together along these lines.

A final 'm'

In classical poetry a final **m** before a word beginning with a vowel is treated as if it was barely there at all, a nasalized sound without closing your lips. The whole syllable is subject to elision:[1]

— —| — —|— ||∪ ∪ |— —|— ∪ ∪|— —
quid tant(um) īnsānō iuvat indulgēre dolōrī?
What help is it to yield so much to your demented grief? [17.8]

Note that the **i** of **<u>ī</u>nsānō** above is a vowel, but the **i** of **<u>i</u>uvat** is a consonant and hence no elision of the preceding **o**.

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[1] The final **m** in medieval Latin poetry was not elided. No doubt it was consolidated by students of Latin who had to show that they knew the difference between, for example, **puell<u>a</u>** and the accusative **puell<u>am</u>**.

Counterpoint of quantity and stress

In addition to having a long or short quantity, a syllable may or may not be stressed. To read classical Latin poetry you need to observe both quantity and stress. As explained on p. 354 in the book, you stress the second last syllable of a word if it is a long syllable; or, if it is short, stress the third last syllable:

amā́bit (*s/he will love*) **dóminus** (*master, lord*)

Here are the natural word-stresses for the hexameters whose quantities were noted above:

′ ′ ′ (′) ′ ′
— ∪ ∪ |— ∪ ∪|—|| ∪ ∪|— ∪ ∪| — ∪ ∪| — ∪
sed fugit intereā, fugit irreparābile tempus

′ ′ ′ ′ ′ ′ ′
— ∪ ∪| — ∪∪|— ||—|— ∪ ∪ |— ∪ ∪ |— —
ī, sequer(e) Ītaliam ventīs, pete rēgna per undās.

′ ′ ′ ′ (′) ′ ′
— —| — —|— ||∪ ∪ |— —|— ∪ ∪|— —
quid tant(um) īnsānō iuvat indulgēre dolōrī?

In the first four feet of a hexameter a stressed syllable may be long or short. But in the final two feet, the natural stress coincides with the first (long) syllables of each foot.[1] This is a rule you can test now on any of the hexameters you have read. The counterpoint of stress and quantity is a defining characteristic of classical Latin poetry.

The assimilation of Greek poetic techniques took time. The work of Virgil and Ovid was the flowering of a creative effort lasting some two hundred years. By their time, and with their inspiration, the dance between the natural sounds of Latin and Greek quantities was at its breathtaking best. Later medieval Latin verse, of the spontaneous sort, reverted to rhythms of stress only. There were quantitative compositions too, but few managed to recover the easy and natural interplay of quantity and stress which we hear in the rhythms of their classical models.

Practice

Scan these hexameters, adding stresses and caesuras:
(a) dēsine mēque tuīs incendere tēque querēlīs. [3.10]
(b) silvīs tē, Tyrrhēne, ferās agitāre putāstī? [15.15]

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[1] There are very few exceptions to this rule. There is no more compelling evidence for the presence of stress in Latin than this fact of coincidence, which happens too consistently to be an accident.

Metres appearing in this course

The list below includes only those snippets of verse which contain at least two completed lines (and possibly some incomplete lines):

Hexameters
4.13; 11.4; 11.5; 13.5; 13.15; 14.1; 14.2; 14.9; 14.10; 14.11; 14.12; 14.14; 15.3; 15.4; 15.5; 15.16; 16.1; 16.2; 16.3; 17.1; 17.5; 17.8; 17.9; 18.2; 19.7; 19.8; 19.11; 20.7; 22.3; 22.4; 22.5; 22.7; 22.8; 24.1; 24.2; 24.3; 24.4; 24.5; 24.6; 24.9; 24.10; 24.12; 24.15

Elegaic couplets
A Latin or Greek ‘elegy’ is so called because of its metre, the elegiac couplet. This is a pair of lines, the first being the hexameter, and the second a ‘pentameter’ (one foot less: *pente* is Greek for five). The pentameter usually completes the sentence or unit of sense. Catullus, Propertius, Tibullus, Ovid and Martial all use these couplets.
11.12; 13.6; 13.7; 13.8; 13.9; 13.14; 14.4; 14.6; 15.1; 15.8; 15.12; 15.13; 15.14; 16.4; 16.9; 18.1; 19.6; 20.10; 21.13
— ∪̲∪̲ | — ∪̲∪̲ | — || ∪̲∪̲ | — ∪̲∪̲ | — ∪∪ | — ∪̲
— ∪̲∪̲ | — ∪̲∪̲ | — || — ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | —

Hendecasyllabics
Each line has eleven syllables (*hendeca* is Greek for eleven); used by Catullus and Martial.
13.1; 15.6; 15.9
∪̲ ∪̲ — ∪ ∪ — ∪ — ∪ — ∪̲

Alcaic stanza (4 lines)
This and the other Greek lyric metres below were borrowed by Horace.
11.13; 11.14; 13.4; 14.7; 24.7; 25.1
∪̲ — ∪— —|— ∪ ∪ |— ∪ ∪̲
∪̲ — ∪— —|— ∪ ∪ |— ∪ ∪̲
∪̲ — ∪— — — ∪ — ∪̲
— ∪ ∪ — ∪ ∪ — ∪ — ∪̲

Sapphic stanza (4 lines)
15.7; 22.6
— ∪ — — — ∪ ∪ — ∪ — ∪̲ (1st 3 lines)
— ∪ ∪ — ∪̲ (4th line)

Iambic Strophe
22.2
∪̲ — ∪— ∪̲ |— ∪ — ∪̲ — ∪ ∪̲ (22.2, line 5: ∪̲ — ∪— ∪̲ | ∪ ∪ ∪ — ∪̲ — ∪ ∪̲)
∪̲ — ∪— ∪̲ — ∪ ∪̲