Verse Scansion

Eric Armstrong - W2006

Syllables, Feet and Meter

Classical texts written in verse form use many different styles of meter. As you probably know, Shakespeare and his contemporaries used *iambic pentameter,* which has become the most commonly used metrical scheme in the English language. There is some confusion as to what the term means, so let's clear this up right away. Metrical schemes are systems to analyze and simplify the rhythmic structures of verse language, and they rely on *feet* as a means to group syllables into repeating patterns. As English relies primarily on word and syllable stress for its meaning (rather than length of syllable, either *short* or *long*, as Greek and Latin do,) we divide syllables in feet into *stressed* and *unstressed* syllables. Feet that end in a stressed syllable are known as *masculine* and those that end in unstressed syllables are *feminine.* One can also say a verse line that ends on an unstressed syllable has a *feminine ending.* As English is generally spoken in a flowing, continuous style, not separating each word, the pulse of the language goes through words, without regard to their beginnings or endings. As a result, verse lines can be broken into feet without regard to separate words – the focus is on the stress of the words in the context of the line.

Let's revisit the term *iambic pentameter* – like all terms used to label metrical schemes, it describes first the typical foot used in the verse line, followed by the number of feet. An iamb begins with an unstressed syllable, followed by a stressed syllable. Pentameter refers to the five feet within the line. Similarly, one might have *trochaic hexameter*, or *anapestical tetrameter* (e.g. *'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house…)* The following list of feet outlines all the feet we are likely to encounter in Shakespeare's verse forms.

List of Feet

monosyllable monosyllabic	/	Go	masculine
iamb iambic	˘ /	about	masculine
trochee trochaic (reversed iamb)	/ ˘	better	feminine
A pyrrhic foot* pyrrhic	˘ ˘	... and a …	feminine
spondee * spondaic	/ /	…more mad …	masculine
anapest anapestical	˘ ˘ /	lemonade	masculine
dactyl dactylic	/ ˘ ˘	sensible	feminine

* - Pyrrhic and Spondaic feet are often perceived as iambic, as long as the second syllable is equal or slightly stronger than the first syllable. Pyrrhic feet are sometimes noted ˘ \ where the \ indicates syllable that is slightly more stressed. Similarly, a spondee may be indicated by \ /, which feels iambic or by /\, which feels trochaic.

amphibrach amphibrachic (feminine iamb)	˘ / ˘	dramatic	feminine
amphimacer amphimaceric	/ ˘ /	multitude	masculine
triple ending	˘ / ˘ ˘	fantastical	feminine
Epic caesura	amphibrach at the caesura; a feminine ending at midline		
Epic iamb	˘ ˘ / /	pyrrhic + spondee at the beginning of a line or after a caesura (two feet)	
Headless line	first foot is a monosyllable		
Broken backed line	foot after caesura is a monosyllable		
Squinting line	when shared lines don't quite match up, or there is some debate as to who is sharing which lines		

typical iambic line	˘ /	˘ /	˘ /	˘ /	˘ /
	1 ***2***	3 ***4***	5 ***6***	7 ***8***	9 ***10***
	& 1	& 2	& 3	& 4	& 5

Punctuation & Caesuras

Verse lines that have punctuation at their ends are known as *end-stopped lines*, while those that do not have punctuation are called *enjambed lines*. Note that they're not called "end-jammed" lines; the term comes from *enjambment*, which means *to straddle* in French. Verse lines were traditionally broken into two parts at a midline break, called a *caesura,* most often occurring between the second and third foot (though Shakespeare uses midline breaks after *any syllable*, this is the most common variation).

Points to Remember

- One easy starting point is to suggest that "when you *can* make it iambic, do it." While it is possible to give many differing line readings to a verse line, this guideline supports the idea that we are attempting to maintain the iambic structure through the text. However, there are times when this is obviously not what the author intended, and so we need to understand the more common conventions used by Elizabethan writers, so we can make an educated decision about what else to do, other than strict iambic.
- Feet must be assessed on their own merits. As long as the first syllable of a foot is less stressed than the second syllable, it is perceived as iambic, regardless of the syllables that precede or follow it. If we put syllables on a

scale of 1 – 10, where 1 is the least stressed syllable, and 10 is the greatest, the following theoretical lines are all iambic:

- 3 7 | 3 7 | 3 7 | 3 7 | 3 7
- 8 10 | 7 9 | 4 6 | 3 5 | 1 2
- 1 2 | 3 4 | 5 6 | 7 8 | 9 10

- Shakespeare (and his contemporaries) enjoyed modifying the iambic structure for a number of reasons: to make the text feel more conversational in tone, to shake up the reader/listener/speaker's expectation of the line, to draw attention to a particularly important word, image or concept, to make a character seem less balanced, more out-of-control. All these concepts can help an actor to understand the state of being of the character in question, merely by asking "who speaks like this?" or "why do I chose to speak in this manner?"
- Shakespeare had some preferences when he modified the iambic structure
  - Trochees occur most often at the beginnings of lines or after a midline break, and seldom (if ever) occur at the ends of lines
  - Feminine Iambs (amphibrachs) occur quite often at the ends of lines and occasionally before a midline break, and shouldn't be perceived as highly irregular. They modify the shift into the next line somewhat (usually either suspending it slightly longer, or in some cases, pushing the speaker on to the next line more quickly)
- When things get confusing, it is best to start scanning the line *backward,* foot by foot, to see where things get wonky. This approach often resolves scansion questions the quickest.
- Though it is possible to rely on anapests (˘˘ /) and dactyls (/ ˘˘) for scansion, it is advised to avoid them until there appears to be no other option
- The English language has changed somewhat since the Early Modern period when Shakespeare wrote, and this has affected the stress of some words. In some instances, words that are shortened today were pronounced with an "extra" syllable in Elizabethan times. On the other hand, some words that we usually say with several syllables can be *elided* into a shorter form, allowing the speaker to maintain the iambic structure (e.g. "Heavens" as one syllable, or "many a" as two [mɛn jə]). Also, there are some words that, in some modern dialects have a two syllable feel, that can be said with one (e.g. "file," not "fie-yul.") In some rare instances, words have changed their stress completely (e.g. Politically – [ˈpɒlɪˌtɪklɨ]).
- Names may be pronounced differently depending on context, particularly at the ends of lines – with more or less syllables (e.g. *Romeo* is more often pronounced as a trochee (/ ˘) within the line, than as an amphimacer (/ ˘ /), which occurs only at the ends of lines).
- *-ed endings* are sometimes pronounced, and sometimes not. Note that we pronounce them ourselves in words like "noted," or in some lingering, archaic pronunciations like "beloved." Depending on edition, these may be annotated as –èd when the schwa is to be pronounced, *glovèd*. In other editions, the absence of schwa is indicated by –'d, *belov'd*. However, their use is inconsistent, and you are advised to check them all.

- *-est endings* are usually pronounced as part of the previous syllable (e.g. "camest" [kɛɪmst]), and may or may not be marked as "cam'st."
- *-tion endings* at the ends of lines often need the pronunciation [-ʃi.ən] to scan correctly.

Practice word lists –compiled by Roger Gross (University of Arkansas)
Compression:
Immediate, Antium, Epidamnium, incestuous, sumptuous, voluptuousness, ambiguous, issuing, material, memorial, filial, annual, continually, effectually, radiant, speediest, lustiest, ruffian, tarrying, ruffling, rustling, jangling, justifying, marrying, sensual, spiritual, unusual, victual;

Battery, battering, frailty, gathering, glistering, immoderate, shouldering, slippery, tenderer, venturing, babbling, barbarism, bravery, ivory, marvelous, adventurous, dangerously, treasonous, liberal, lingering, medicine, opening, preposterous, lecherous, poisonous, treacherous, slanderous, blusterer, confederacy, confederate, conquering evilly, favorite, delivering, differences, differing, emerald, Ethiop, flatterest, foolery, foppery, gardener, pestering, savory, scandalous, several, president, rancorous, robbery;

Camest, showest, cutest, foughtest, knowest, huntest, fearest, hangest, strewest, talkest, sendest, sentest, seest, scaldest, runest, pryest, barest, beest, bleedest, dippedest, fellest, feltest, notest, pluckest, sitest, walkest, wearest, copest, criedest, scaldest, diest, keepest, lovedest, feelest, bearest, saidest, taughtest, speakest, splitest, stayest, diedest, prunest, wearest, lovedst;

Consumest, deniest, flatterest, pitiedst, contrivedest, esteemest, presentest, restrainest, pursuest, commitest, wholesomest, usurpst, buriest, perceivest, preventest

Extension:
Companion, Hyperion, contemplation, protestation, constitution, inspiration, instigation, imagination, condition, instruction, insurrection, invention, invocation, usurpation, visitation, function, passion;

Antonio, Bellario, Litio, Claudio, Tranio, Dromio, Cassio, Fulvia, Juliet, Romeo, Ariel, Glendower, Charmian, Ethiope, Gratiano, Parthia.