INTRODUCTION TO METER, RHYME, & FIGURES OF SPEECH

METER

Prosody is the study of the rhythm of poetry or prose as it is manipulated for literary effect. Scansion is the system of describing metrical effect. To scan a poem is to determine its meter.

WHY LEARN ABOUT METER

Being able to recognize the meter of a poem is no guarantee of being able to appreciate it better, but it does provide a set of terms for describing technical differences between one poem and another. Moreover, it can help identify how poets manipulate their meter to reinforce their theme. Changes in feet in closed form poetry often indicate points of stress or a shift in thought, feeling, tone, or mood. In lines describing how meter fits theme, Pope uses spondees to make the line labor with Ajax:

When Ajax strives / some rock's / vast weight / to throw
The line / too labor / the words / move slow.

In addition to these specific effects, some meters work better in some kinds of poems than in others. For example, trochaic meter works better in short lyrics like Leigh Hunt's "Jenny kissed me," Byron's "Maid of Athens, ere we part," or Arnold's "Requiescat" than in long narratives. Iambic tetrameter is effective in witty or satirical poems like Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" or Swift's "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift," and iambic pentameter works well in dramatic verse (Browning's dramatic monologues or Shakespeare), narrative verse (Paradise Lost or Don Juan), or meditative-descriptive verse (Pope's Pastorals, Wordsworth's Prelude, or Yeats's "Prayer for My Daughter"). For a fuller discussion of meter see, Paul Fussel's Poetic Meter and Poetic Form, John Hollander's Rhyme's Reason, or Ezra Pound's A B C of Reading.

FIVE KINDS OF RHYTHM

1. Quantitative. The length of the line of verse is determined by a combination of long and short syllables. The words long and short refer to the fact that some syllables require more time to pronounce than others; e.g., because the last syllable of miseries has an additional speech sound in it (the s), it takes longer to pronounce than the last syllable of misery. Quantitative verse appears in Latin poetry, which differs from English poetry in that the feet (defined below) are determined by combinations of long and short, rather than stressed and unstressed, syllables. Although there have been attempts to write quantitative verse in English (as illustrated in the Tennyson quote below), it is questionable whether the results are truly quantitative because of the strongly accentual nature of the language:

    O mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies,
    O skilled to sing of Time or Eternity,
    God-gifted organ-voice of England
    Milton, a name to resound for ages,
    Whose Titan angels, Gabriel, Abdiel,
    Starred from Jehovah's gorgeous armories,
    Tower, as the deep-domed empyrean
    Rings to the roar of an angel onset--
2. **Accentual.** The length of line is determined by the number of stressed syllables in a line (stress is created in English by a combination of loudness, pitch, and sometimes length) regardless of the number and arrangement of unstressed syllables in the line. Old English verse followed this pattern, which is now rare in English. The first example below, a translation from Old English, has four stresses; the second, by W. H. Auden, has three (stressed syllables are underlined throughout this handout):

   a. Oft the *lone* man learns the favor,  
      the grace of God, though *go* he must  
      his *ways* on the *deep, dreary* and *long*.

   b. I sit in *one* of the *dives*  
      On *Fifty-Second Street*  
      *Uncertain* and *afraid*  
      As the *clever* hopes *expire*  
      Of a *low dishonest* decade:

3. **Syllabic.** The length of the line is determined by the number of syllables in the line. The accent varies or is absent. This form is standard in French and in forms like the Japanese haiku; c. below is a rare English example from Marianne Moore:

   a. All night, this headland (5 syllables)  
      Lunges into the rumpling (7 syllables)  
      Capework of the wind. (5 syllables) (by Richard Wilbur)

   b. Under a splintered mast, (6)  
      torn from the ship and cast (6)  
      near her hull, (3)

   c. a stumbling shepherd found, (6)  
      embedded in the ground (6)  
      a sea-gull... (3)

4. **Accentual-syllabic.** The number of syllables and the number of accents are both counted, and the stressed and unstressed syllables are usually alternated in a consistent pattern. When we think of poetry in English, this is the form we think of, and it is the most common form from the time of Chaucer to the advent of free verse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

   a. And *justify* the *ways* of *God* to *men*. (5 accents, 10 syllables)

   b. And *malt* does *more* than *Milton can*  
      To *justify* God's *ways* to *man*. (4 accents, 8 syllables)

   c. *Wake*: the *silver* dusk *returning*  
      *Up* the beach of darkness *brims*  
      *And* the ship of *sunrise burning*  
      *Strands* upon the *eastern* *rims*. (4 accents, 8 syllables with final unstressed syllables in lines 2 & 4 omitted, a common variation)
5. **Free verse.** This form, common in poetry since Whitman, differs from the others in that the line length is determined by the idea in the line and the overall cadence of the poem, not by a count of syllables, stresses, or other elements. In example a. below, by Whitman, the line arrangement and lengths (short, long, long in stanza one; long, long, short in stanza two) create a symmetry which, combined with the phrase repetition, suggests the cycle of return mentioned in the lines. In example b., by T. S. Eliot, the line division throws emphasis on the final words and phrases, thereby stressing that the reader should "think."

   a. When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
      And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
      I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

      Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
      Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
      And thought of him I love.

   b. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
      History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors,
      And issues; deceives with whispering ambitions,
      Guides us by vanities; Think now
      She gives when our attention is distracted . . .
      . . . Gives too soon
      Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
      Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think
      Neither fear nor courage saves us . . .

**HOW TO FIND A METER IN ACCENTUAL-SYLLABIC VERSE**

1. Find syllables that would ordinarily be accented in a dictionary and in conversation. In the line "And justify the ways of God to men," for example, the first syllable in *justify* and the syllables comprising *ways*, *God*, and *man* would receive stress in normal conversation. There is a problem: although in the dictionary and in analyzing meter, we usually talk as if there were only two levels of stress (stressed and unstressed), linguists suggest that there may be as many as four in actual spoken English. Thus, in the word *justify*, the *just* is stressed more than *i* or *fy*, but *fy* is stressed more than *i*. Nevertheless, if you look at enough lines, you should be able to get an overall sense of the meter. The important thing to remember is that skillful poets will have a meter, which fits a pattern, but which is also true to the actual rhythms of spoken English; their work should sound natural.

2. Because poets want their work to sound natural, the meter of a given line, or even passage, may vary slightly from the basic pattern; therefore, you need to go over several lines assigning the stresses where they would fall in normal conversation. If you look at enough lines, a general pattern should emerge.

3. A stressed syllable will be accompanied by some unstressed syllables, and in English they usually (though not always) come before the stressed syllable. A stressed syllable and the unstressed syllable(s), which go with it, are called a **Foot**. If you look at several lines, it should become clear whether the unstressed syllables precede or follow the stressed.
4. After you have found the stressed and unstressed syllables, you may then put strokes between the feet to determine the meter. The meter depends on the Type and Number of feet in a line. In the example below, the type of foot has an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed, and there are five such feet. The meter would therefore be labeled *iambic pentameter* (iambic for the type of foot and pentameter for the number).

The *cur/ few tolls/ the knell/ of part/ ing day*.

**TYPES OF FEET**

1. **trochee** (adjective form, *trochaic*) stressed-unstressed
   
   a. *Never/ never/ never/ never/ never*
   
   b. *In the/ spring a/ young man's/ fancy/ lightly/ turns to/ thoughts of/ love*. (In spite of a few feet where the stress is debatable, especially foot 3, this poem is generally trochaic, as a look at the rest of it would show. It is very common to omit the final unstressed syllable in this meter; see c. under accentual-syllabic above.)

2. **anapest** (anapestic) unstressed-unstressed-stressed
   
   a. *It was man/y and man/y a year/ ago* (The variation in the last foot is common.)
   
   b. *The Assyrian came down/ like a wolf/ on the fold,*
   *And his co/horts were gleam/ing in purp/le and gold.*

3. **dactyl** (dactylic) stressed-unstressed-unstressed
   
   a. *This is the/ forest pri/meval, the/ murmuring/ pines and the/ hemlocks* (The two stressed syllables in the last foot are required by the classical Greek form of the epic, which Longfellow is imitating.)

   b. *What if a/ much of a/ which of a/ wind*

4. **spondee** (spondaic) stressed-stressed

   The spondee appears in isolated feet and never as a dominant meter in an entire poem. It is a convenient way of describing feet in which it is hard to determine which syllable is stressed (e.g., *young man's* and *hemlocks* above) and of describing passages like the following from sonnets, where Donne uses the spondees to hammer home the woes people can face in life and Hopkins uses them along with internal rhyme, assonance, and alliteration for an unusual sound effect.

   a. *All whom/ war, death,/ age, ag/ues, tyr/annies,
   Despair,/ law, chance,/ hath slain,/ and you/ whose eyes
   Shall be/hold God*

   b. *Crushed. Why/ do men/ then now/ not reck/ his rod?*

5. **pyrrhic** (pyrrhic) unstressed-unstressed. See 6 d. below for an example.
6. **iamb (iambic)** unstressed-stressed

The iamb is far and away the most common foot in English, comprising as much as 90-95 percent of English verse. It is also the most conversational of the feet and therefore the most flexible and most susceptible to variations. One such variation, as illustrated in the previous two quotes, is the substitution of spondees for iambs. Others are listed below:

a. *Five years*/ have *passed, / five sum/mers with/ the length / Of five/long wint/ers! . . .*

In addition to the spondees in the first line, the word *with* receives what is called a **courtesy accent**; that is, it must be given more than normal conversational stress to fill out the line. Critics have argued that the basic rhythm of spoken English usually dictates about four stresses per line (the form of Old English verse) and that lines of poetry with five feet will therefore contain one courtesy accent. This example also shows how a poet can manipulate meter for effect. Wordsworth stresses the sense of the time lapse by repeating *five* and *long* (and its noun form length) and stressing these words in normally unstressed positions.

b. *Scoffing/ his state/ and grin/ning at/ his pomp.*

In addition to the courtesy accent in the fourth foot, Shakespeare includes a trochee in the first foot. A trochee in an iambic line is called a **reversed foot**. In iambic pentameter verse, a reversed foot occurs frequently in the first foot, sometimes in the third and fourth, and almost never in the second and fifth.

c. *To be/ or not/ to be;/ That is/ the question.*

The extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line, though not common, is still a possible variation in an iambic line. Note the fourth foot is reversed (unless you startle people by saying "That IS the question," as Peter O'Toole is said to have done in one production of *Hamlet*).

d. *At the/ round earth's/ ima/gined cor/ners blow.*

The beginning of this line from Donne has a Pyrrhic Foot followed by a Spondee. This combination (called a **Double** or **Ionic Foot**) often appears at the beginning of a line.

e. *Of all/ that in/solent Greece/ or haught/y Rome.*

An anapest in an iambic line is more common in some ages and poets (here, Jonson) than in others.

f. *And my/ tears make/ a heaven/ly Lethe/an flood.*

This line by Donne shows such a wide range of variations that we might not call it iambic if it were not in a sonnet with other iambic lines. As a clergyman, Donne almost certainly pronounced heaven as one syllable (the way it is in hymns), and he appears to have stressed the second syllable of Lethean. The line thus contains three regular feet, a spondee, and an anapest. Donne generally makes his "Holy Sonnets" very irregular to combine powerful emotion and a oratorical effect as in a sermon. But the point is that knowing what the regular meter was supposed to be helps us identify and describe the effect Donne creates.
There are some other exotic feet such as the **amphibrach** (unstressed-stressed-unstressed), but for all practical purposes, these six are the ones you need to know.

## NUMBERS OF FEET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feet</th>
<th>Number of Feet Per Line</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monometer</td>
<td>one foot per line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimeter</td>
<td>two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimeter</td>
<td>three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tetrameter</td>
<td>four</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pentameter</td>
<td>five feet per line</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hexameter</td>
<td>six</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heptameter</td>
<td>seven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Octameter</td>
<td>eight</td>
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</tbody>
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Almost all accentual-syllabic poetry in English, with the exception of isolated lines in lyrics, will have four or five feet in the line. Probably *trimeter* through *hexameter* will be all the terms you will ever have to use.

## RHYME

### Types of Rhyme

Rhyme is "Identity of terminal sound between accented syllables, usually occupying corresponding positions in two or more lines of verse" (William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 10th. ed.). In fact, Holman and Harmon discuss some rhyme which is not "terminal," and some rhymes include unaccented syllables, but unless otherwise indicated, the types of rhyme listed below are examples of **end rhyme** (i.e., rhyme occurring at the ends of lines) and involve accented syllables. The terms in parentheses are alternate names for the same effects, and you can see that some terms overlap. Rhymed syllables are underlined.

(Kenneth Burke's essay "On the Musicality in Verse," in his *Philosophy of Literary Form*, discusses other kinds of sound effects including those created by repeating consonant sounds which are not identical but which are phonetically close together like *b*, *p*, and *m*.)

1. **Perfect Rhyme** (*single rhyme, true rhyme, masculine rhyme*)—rhyme of the final vowel and consonant or final vowel when the line ends with a vowel. This is usually what we think of when we mention "rhyme." The term **Masculine Rhyme** particularly denotes that stressed syllables are being rhymed.

   Know then thyself, presume not God to Scan,
   The proper study of mankind is Man.

2. **Feminine Rhyme** (*double rhyme*)—rhyme of syllables with a stressed-unstressed metrical pattern.

   With rue my heart is laden,
   For golden friends I had,
   For many a rose-lipt maiden
   And many a lightfoot lad.

3. **Triple Rhyme**—rhyme of three syllables with a stressed-unstressed-unstressed metrical pattern.

   But--Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual,
   Inform us truly, have they not hen-pecked you all?
   (Theoretically one could go on with this and have quadruple, quintuple, etc. rhyme.)
4. **Half Rhyme** (slant, near, off, or oblique rhyme, sometimes consonance)—rhyme of final consonants (not to be confused with alliteration, which is repetition of consonantsounds within a line; see 5. below).

   Unmoved, she notes the chariot's pausing
   At her low gate;
   Unmoved, an emperor is kneeling
   Upon her mat.
   (This is not perfect rhyme because the a's in gate and mat are pronounced differently.)
   A compensation for the pang of his birth
   Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

5. **Assonance**—repetition of vowel sounds within a line or at the end of lines when the lines end with different consonants.

   Death's second self that seals up all in rest.
   (The repetition of s and l sounds in this line illustrates alliteration.)

   I never spoke with God,
   Nor visited in heaven;
   Yet certain am I of the spot
   As if the chart were given.
   (The rhyme of heaven and given illustrates rhyme of unaccented syllables.)

6. **Consonance (rich consonance)**—rhyme of the last two consonant sounds when the vowels are different.

   Let the boy try along this bayonet blade
   How cold steel is, and keen with the hunger of blood;

7. **Internal Rhyme**—rhyme of words after the first and before the last syllables in a line.

   dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding

8. **Leonine Rhyme (internal rhyme)**—rhyme of a word in the middle of a line with one at the end.

   And ice mast high, came floating by

9. **Eye Rhyme**—rhyme that appears to be perfect rhyme, but is either half rhyme (move, love) or no rhyme (bough, trough).

**Some Rhyme Schemes**

(In the notation used below, the number denotes the number of feet in a line, "x" stands for an unstressed syllable, and "a" stands for a stressed syllable. Thus "5xa" would mean iambic pentameter. The rhyme schemes are designated by the other letters; "aa" would therefore designate two contiguous lines that rhyme.)
1. **couplet**  aa,  **heroic couplet**  5xa "closed" (containing a complete syntactic unit)
2. **tercet**  aaa
3. **terza rima**  aba bcb cdc etc. concluding with a couplet or quatrain, 5xa
4. **heroic quatrain**  abab, 5xa
5. **"In Memoriam" stanza**  abba, 4xa
6. **ballad or hymn stanza**  abcb, 4 stress, 3 stress, 4 stress, 3 stress
7. **rime royal**  ababbcc, 5xa
8. **ottava rima**  abababcc, 5xa
9. **Monk's Tale" stanza**  ababbc, 5xa
10. **Spenserian stanza**  ababbc, 5xa, last line 6xa
11. **Petrarchan or Italian sonnet**  abbaabba (octave) cdcdec, or cdecde, or cdeedc (sestet), 5xa usually
12. **Shakespearean or English sonnet**  abab cdcd efef gg, 5xa usually
13. **Spenserian sonnet**  abab bcbc cdcd ee, 5xa usually
14. **blank verse**  unrhymed 5xa  (not to be confused with free verse)
15. **triolet**  abaaabab (line 1 is repeated as lines 4 and 7; line 2 is repeated as line 8)
16. **villanelle**  aba aba aba aba aba abaa (line 1 is repeated as lines 6, 12, and 18: line 3 is repeated as lines 9, 15, 19)

**FIGURES OF SPEECH**

*A Handbook to Literature* 10th ed., by William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman defines **figures of speech** as "The various uses of language that depart from customary construction, order, or significance." Harmon and Holman point out that terminology describing figures of speech has changed over time, but they identify two broad categories--tropes and rhetorical figures--that are exemplified below:

**TROPES.**  ". . . [A] trope is a FIGURE OF SPEECH involving a 'turn' or change of sense—the use of a word in a sense other than the literal. . . ." Types of Tropes include some of the following:

1. **Metaphor.**  "An ANALOGY identifying one object with another and ascribing to the first object one or more qualities of the second." This term is usually defined as a comparison of two things, which is implied and does not use *like* or *as*. The two components of a metaphor are its **tenor** (the literal subject to which the figure is attached) and **vehicle** (the figure or image to which the subject is being compared):
That time of year thou mayest in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, of few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold . . .
(tenor, old age; vehicle, autumn)

The term metaphor overlaps somewhat with other terms—for instance, a metaphysical conceit is a type of metaphor and simile (see below) and comparisons in general are sometimes loosely said to be metaphorical.

2. **Simile.** "A figure in which a similarity between two objects is directly expressed. . . . Most . . . are introduced by as or like or even by such a word as 'compare,' 'liken,' or 'resemble.'"

   My love is like a red, red rose
   (tenor, love; vehicle, rose)

3. **Metonymy.** "The substitution of the name of an object closely associated with a word for the word itself."

   In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.
   (tenor, labor; vehicle, sweat of thy face)

4. **Synecdoche.** "A TROPE in which a part signifies the whole or the whole signifies the part."

   Cuckoo, Cuckoo: Oh word of fear,
   Unpleasing to a married ear!
   (tenor, husband; vehicle, husband's ear)

5. **Symbol.** "...[S]omething that is itself and also stands for something else. . . a symbol combines a literal and sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect." A symbol is one thing that stands for another which is different in kind from the first. A snake is both an actual reptile and the embodiment of evil, sexual potency, and other abstractions.

6. **Allegory.** "A form of extended METAPHOR in which objects, persons, and actions in a NARRATIVE are equated with meanings that lie outside the NARRATIVE itself." In other words, an allegory is a kind of symbolic story, but symbols usually have meanings in isolation from other aspects of the works in which they appear, whereas the individual parts of an allegory have meaning only in relation to the rest of the allegory. Symbols are also evocative and suggest a variety of meanings. The components of allegory have limited and very clear cut meanings (e.g., the character Everyman in the play of that name stands for every person, and the action allegorically presents every person's moment of death).

7. **Irony.** This term is used in many contexts to refer to many different things (e.g., dramatic irony refers to a situation in which the audience knows something that the character does not). As a trope, irony (or verbal irony) refers to a situation "in which the actual intent is expressed in words that carry the opposite meaning." That is, the author says one thing but means something else. Swift's "Modest Proposal" is a famous extended example.

8. **Paradox.** "A statement that although seemingly contradictory or absurd may actually be well founded or true." See the following example where the identity of "you," (i.e., God) explains the contradiction:
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

RHETORICAL FIGURES (also called schemes or figures of thought). Uses of language for rhetorical effect without changes in meaning.

1. **Apostrophe.** "A FIGURE OF SPEECH in which someone (usually but not always absent), some abstract quality, or a nonexistent personage is directly addressed as though present":

   Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean--roll!

2. **Hyperbole.** "Exaggeration" or poetic overstatement:

   Had all his hairs been lives, my great revenge
   Had stomach for them all.

3. **Understatement (meiosis).** "...[T]he literal sense of what is said falls detectably short of (or 'under') the magnitude of what is being talked about." Thus in Henry IV's warning to Hotspur, the word *displease* clearly understates the effect of the king's wrath:

   Send me your prisoners with the speediest means,
   Or you shall hear in such a kind from me
   As will displease you.

   A special form of understatement is *litotes*, "in which a thing is affirmed by stating the negative of its opposite": Hrothgar says to Beowulf, "You will not lack what you wish if you survive that deed of valor." That is, he will get what he wishes.

4. **Onomatopoeia.** "Words that by their sound suggest their meaning...":

   Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
   Among the river sallows. . . .

5. **Antithesis.** "A FIGURE OF SPEECH characterized by strongly contrasting words, clauses, sentences, or ideas. . . ."

   Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,
   Or some frail china jar receive a flaw
   Or stain her honor or her new brocade,
   Forget her prayers or miss a masquerade,
   Or lose her heart, or necklace at a ball. . . .

6. **Personification.** "A figure that endows animals, ideas, abstractions, and inanimate objects with human form...":

   The Moon doth with delight
   Look round her when the heavens are bare. . . .

   Also called *Prosopopoeia*, "specifically when the personified figure speaks. . . ."