

Greek and Latin Metre IV

The Dactylic Hexameter: Latin



- Inherited from Greek; first transferred into Latin by Quintus Ennius (c.239-169 B.C.).
- The rules of the metre were not learned via an oral tradition; they were instead inferred via writing not only from Homeric practice but also from that of subsequent Greek (particularly Hellenistic) poets.
- The hexameter was refined particularly in the first century B.C., and the practice of Vergil (70-19 B.C.) is regarded as the apogee of this metrical form for subsequent poets and for Classical scholars.

Some Hexametric Openings:

Ennius *Annales* I.1: *Musae, quae pedibus magnum pulsatis Olympum*

Lucilius *Satirae* I.1: *aetheris et terrae genitabile quaerere tempus*

Lucretius *DRN* I.1 *Aeneadum genetrix, hominum diuomque uoluptas*

Persius *Satirae* I.1 *o curas homin(um)! o quantum (e)st in rebus inane!*

Dactyls vs Spondees:

Latin is a language less stocked with short syllables (and short final vowels) than Greek, and as a result spondees are commoner in the Latin hexameter. Holospondaic lines are, however, very rare:

Enn. *Ann.* fr. 31 *olli respondit rex Albai Longai*

Cf. Vergil's adaption at *Aen.* XII.18: *olli sedato respondit corde Latinus.*

Where desired, however, holodactylic lines could readily be fashioned, e.g.: *Aen.* VIII.506:

quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum

N.B. Homer produced a wholly dactylic line in roughly 1 / 5 verses, Vergil in 1 / 200.

To take the practice of Vergil as a guide, the four most common arrangements of the first four feet were (D[actyl]; S[pondee]): DSSS (14.3%), DDSS (12%), DSDD (11.2%), SDSS (9.5%); SSSS accounts for only 7.1%. Broadly speaking, dactyls were more favoured in the first two feet, spondees in the next two (third and fourth), before the (very probably) dactylic fifth foot and line close: 61% of the first feet of the *Aen.* are dactylic, 70% of the fourth spondaic. Even more generally speaking, later poets (Ovid in particular) favoured a more dactylic rhythm throughout the line.

[On the Hellenistic fetish for fifth-foot spondees, see below.]

Caesurae:

As in Greek, each hexameter must contain at least one caesura. In the case of polished Latin hexameters, it must possess one (or more) of the following three types:

- (i) After the first long (*longum*) of the third foot ('penthemimeral caesura'): e.g. Cat. 62.1:

Vesper adest, iuuenes, ÷ consurgite. Vesper Olympo

As in Greek, this is known as the 'strong' or 'masculine' caesura. It can be the only caesura in a line, e.g. Verg. *Ecl.* IX.58:

aspice uentosi ÷ ceciderunt murmuris aurae

However, it is regularly bolstered by strong caesurae in the second foot and the fourth foot (ii): this is the case for 1 / 3 hexameters of the *Aeneid*.

- (ii) After the first long of the fourth foot ('hepthemimeral caesura'), if line lacks (i): e.g. Lucr. I.208:

postremo quoniam incultis ÷ praestare uidemus

This strong fourth-foot caesura is much commoner than in Greek, where it scarcely accounts for 1% of caesurae. It will be favoured if there is close connection between words across other potential caesurae, e.g. Lucr. I.13:

denique per maria ac montis ÷ fluuiosque rapacis

It is typically supported by a strong caesura in the second foot, and often also a weak caesura in the third foot (iii), e.g. Ou. *Met.* I.121:

tum primum ÷ subiere ÷ domos; ÷ domus antra fuerunt

- (iii) After first short of biceps (∪∪), i.e. after trochee (−∪), of third foot: e.g. Cat. 62.9:

non temere exsiluere: ÷ canent ÷ quod †uincere† par est.

Ictus and Accent:

The native accent of Latin words still applied when verse was read (or sung) but its role was secondary to the natural flow / rhythm of the metre. Since the time of Richard Bentley, the founder of the modern study of Classical metrics, it has been observed (and generally accepted) that there was a natural tension between the ‘beat’ (*ictus*) of any given metre and the accents of the words it contained. In the context of the hexameter it has been well observed that, consciously or unconsciously, Latin poets wrote hexameters in which the ictus and accent generally *conflict* in the first three or four feet, and then *coincide* harmoniously in the final two (or three) feet. E.g.:

Cicero *De cons. suo* fr. 2.1:

principio aethério flammátus **I**úppiter **í**gni

Lucretius *DRN* I.1:

Aenádum génetrix, hóminum diuómq̄ue uolúptas



Richard Bentley (1662-1742)

Regular hexameteric line endings:

(...)- ∪ ∪ - ∪ *conderet urbem* | *moenia Romae* | *numine laeso*

(...)- ∪ ∪ - ∪ *unde Latinum* | *(a)dire labores* | *(tenu)ere coloni*

(...)- ∪ ∪ - ∪ *primus ab oris* | *(iac)tatus et alto* | *(Iu)nonis ob iram*

Irregular hexameteric line endings:

Word divisions departing from the three options above occasionally occur: in Vergil 3%, in Catullus 2%, in Lucretius 8%, in Ennius 14% of hexameters display such irregularities.

(...)- ∪ ∪ - ∪

Lucr. I.3 *quae mare nauigerum, quae terras frugiferentis*

(...)- ∪ ∪ - ∪

Lucr. I.4 *concelebras, per te quoniam genus omne animantum*

(...)- ∪ ∪ - ∪

Verg. *Geo.* I.181 *tum uariae inludant pestes: saepe exiguus mus*

cf. Hor. *AP* 139 *parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*

(...)- ∪ ∪ - ∪

Lucr. I.13 *significant initum percussae corda tua ui*

(...)- - - ∪

Enn. *Ann.* 190 *dono, ducite, doque uolentibus cum magnis dis*

cf. *Aen.* III.12 *cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis* (cf. etiam VIII.679)

(...)- ∪ ∪ - ∪

Lucr. I.36 *pascit amore auidos inhians in te, dea, uisus*

Verg. *Aen.* V.731 *debellanda tibi Latio est. Ditis tamen ante*

Often what seems to be a pair of disyllables closing the line should be treated as a dactylic word preceding a disyllable, since a proclitic monosyllable generally opens the fifth foot, which adheres to the following pyrrhic; typically a pause should precede the fifth foot but not occur at the end of the line, e.g.:

Verg. *Ecl.* III.94 *parcite, oues, nimium procedere: non bene ripae...*

Fifth-foot spondees:

nam perhibent olim crudeli peste coactam

Androgeoneae poenas exsoluere caedis

electos iuuenes simul et decus innuptarum

Cecropiam solitam esse dapes dare Minotauro

quis angusta malis cum moenia uexarentur.

Cat. 64.76-80

Cf. Cicero, *Att.* VII.2.1 (50 B.C.):

Brundisium uenimus VII Kal. Dec. usi tua felicitate nauigandi ita belle nobis ‘flauit ab Epiro lenissimus Onchesmites’. hunc σπονδειαίζοντα si cui uoles τῶν νεωτέρων pro tuo uendito!

Varro *Atac. Argonautica* 5 *hortantes ‘o Phoebe’ et ‘ieie’ conclamarunt*

Verg. *Aen.* III.517 *armatumque auro circumspicit Oriona*

Oligologous (?) lines:

A hexameter can occasionally be filled with only three or four words:

Ou. *Met.* I.475 *siluarum tenebris captiuarumque ferarum*

Enn. *Ann. dub.* 9 *introducuntur legati Minturnenses*

Lucr. III.907 *insatiabiliter defleuimus aeternumque*

Cf. Hes. *Op.* 383 Πηλιάδων Ἀτλαγενέων ἐπιτελλομένων

The Golden Line:

Dryden (Pref., *Sylvae* [1685] 6): “That which they call golden, or two substantives and two adjectives, with a verb betwixt them to keep the peace.”

Ideal order: **Adj. A** **Adj. B** **Verb** **Noun A** **Noun B**

Verg. *Geo.* I.497 *grandiaque effusis mirabitur ossa sepulchris*

ibid. I.468 *impiaque aeternam timuerunt saecula noctem*

Sometimes a chiasmic arrangement is favoured:

Aen. V.46 *annuus exactis completur mensibus orbis*

Elision (synaloepha):

Some miscellaneous points on elision in Latin hexameters:

- Long syllables can be elided as well as short, but the elision of them before short syllables, and especially of cretic words (–∪–), is particularly rare, e.g.:

Verg. *Ecl.* III.84 *Pollio amat nostram, quamuis est rustica, Musam:*

Aen. X.179 *hos parere iubent Alpheae ab origine Pisae*

- If prodelision occurs at the close of the line, the prodelided word is identified as part of the same word group as its predecessor, e.g.:

Aen. IV.370 *num lacrimas uictus dedit aut miseratus amantem est?* [=amantemst]

- monosyllables (which in Latin are long perforce) are rarely elided; if they are, they are primarily pronouns and adverbs ending in –m; declinable words are very rarely elided (e.g. *sum*, *rem*).
- words of iambic shape (∪–) are rarely elided.
- words of pyrrhic shape (∪∪) are rarely elided before a short syllable.
- harsh elisions are more common in the first two feet (but avoided in the first syllable of the line).
- elisions are generally rare in the fifth foot and very rare in the sixth.

Vergil was more experimental in elision than other Roman poets, and employed the device more often (4x more often than Ennius, 3x than Lucan, 2x than Cicero). Sometimes there is obvious expressive effect in lines displaying multiple elisions, e.g.

Verg. *Aen.* III.658 *monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum.*

Hiatus:

Hiatus is appreciably rare in Latin poetry and can be typically classified as (i) Graecising, (ii) exclamatory, or (iii) prosodic hiatus (correction). A few examples will suffice:

Long vowels:

Cat. 62.5 (etc.) *Hymen o Hymenaeae, Hymen ades o Hymenaeae!*

Verg. *Geo.* III ? *aetas Lucinam iustosque pati hymenaeos*

Verg. *Ecl.* VII.53 *stant et iuniperi et castanae hirsutae.*

Verg. *Aen.* I.617 *tunc ille Aeneas, quem Dardanio Anchisae*

Short vowels:

Ecl. II.53 *addam cerea pruna – honos erit huic quoque pomo –*
Aen. I.405 *et uera incessu patuit dea. ille ubi matrem*

Correption [=prosodic hiatus]:

A final long vowel or diphthong in hiatus before a word beginning with a vowel or diphthong *can* be shortened for the sake of metre (necessarily this occurs in one of the two shorts of the biceps). E.g.:

Lucr. VI.730 *tempore eo fiant, quo etesia flabra aquilonum*
Verg. Aen. III.211 *insulae Ionio in magno, quas dira Celaeno*

Hypermetre:

In most stichic metres, lines are repeated *ad lib.* without any metrical relation between them. However, very occasionally in Latin, it is possible for an extra ‘hypermetric’ syllable of a hexameter to be elided under the influence of the opening vowel of the following line. Only one instance of such ‘synaphea’ is attested in Greek hexameters (and in the case of an elegiac couplet) – Callimachus *Ep.* 41.1-2:

ἥμισύ μευ ψυχῆς ἔτι τὸ πνέον, ἥμισυ δ’ οὐκ οἶδ’
εἶτ’ Ἔρος εἶτ’ Ἀΐδης ἥρπασε, πλὴν ἀφανές.

The licence, which was entirely unknown to / rejected by Homer and other writers of Greek hexameters, was occasionally used by Lucilius and Catullus but is most famous for its Vergilian employment, in whom it occurs 22 times. Almost all cases involve enclitic *-que*, but a few do not. Often the licence was clearly deployed for special effect:

Verg. Geo. I.295-6 *aut dulcis musti Volcano decoquit umorem*
et foliis undam trepidi despumat aeni.
Verg. Aen. VI.602-3 *quos super atra silex iam iam lapsura cadentique*
imminet adsimilis

Some other scansional / metrical oddities:

- Synizesis: largely limited to *ea, ei, eu* and *ia* – mostly in Greek words but also in forms of Latin nouns such as *alveus* and *aureus*:

Aen. X.116 *hic finis fandi. solio tum Iuppiter aureo*

Also attested with *ee* in verbal compounds, e.g.:

Aen. VII.262 *diuitis uber agri Troiaee opulentia deerit.*

dehinc can be monosyllabic and *deinde* trochaic. *i* and *u* can be semi-consonantal: e.g. *genua* can scan –υ (via synizesis) or υυυ (with dialysis [diaeresis]).

- Occasionally the *e* of enclitic *ne* is lost via apocope before consonants, e.g. *Aen.* X.668-9:

*“omnipotens genitor, tanton̄ me crimine dignum
duxisti et talis uoluisti expendere poenas?”*

- Final *-que* is occasionally lengthened in the *princeps* (initial *longum*) of a foot, e.g., *Aen.* IX.767:

Alcandrumque Haliumque Noemonaque Prytanimque.

Cf. Hom. *Il.* V.678: “*Ἀλκάνδρον θ’ Ἀλίον τε Νοήμονά τε Πρύτανίν τε.*”

- This lengthening is occasionally extended to other final (short) syllables, either under Greek influence or (*ut uid.*) independently, e.g.:

Cat. 62.4 *iam ueniet uirgo, iam dicetur hymenaeus.*

Verg. *Ecl.* VI.53 *ille, latus niueum molli fultus hyacintho*

Verg. *Geo.* III.189 *inualidus, etiamque tremens, etiam inscius aeui*

- In later writers of Latin hexameters (first century A.D. onwards), final *-o* is very often short in words where it would have been long in Classical Latin (e.g. *cardo, uirgo, desino*).

“It’s trochee to rock a rhyme, to rock a rhyme that’s right on time – it’s trochee... tr-tr-tr-trochee.” (J. Simmons, D. McDaniels, D. Fieger, B. Averre)

Why not scan the following (Hor. *AP* 1-10)?

humano capiti ceruicem pictor equinam
iungere si uelit et uarias inducere plumas
undique collatis membris, ut turpiter atrum
desinat in piscem mulier formosa superne,
spectat(um) admissi, risum teneatis, amici? 5
credite, Pisones, isti tabulae fore librum
persimilem, cuius, uelut aegri somnia, uanae
fingentur species, ut nec pes nec caput uni
reddatur formae. “pictoribus atque poetis
quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas.” 10