

Duple Meters

1. Iambic: short-long, signified \sim ' as in: (unrhymed iambic pentameter: 5 feet per verse:
blank verse)

Tō bé ōr nót tō bé: thāt ĩs thē quéstĭon:¹
Whéthēr 'tĭs nóbĭlĕr ĩn thē mĭnd tō súffĕr (first foot inverted as a trochee: see below)
Thē slĭngs ānd ārrōws ōf ōutrāgeōus fórtūne, (feminine endings: see below)
Or tō tākĕ ārms āgāĭnst ā sĕa ōf tróublĕs,
Ānd bý ōppósĭng ĕnd thĕm? (Shakespeare)

The extra final unstressed syllable (the 11th in the line) is called a *feminine ending*. Lines ending with a regular iamb are said to have a *masculine ending*, as in the following stanza of 4 lines:

Thē cúrfĕw tólls thē knĕll ōf pártĭng dáy (heroic quatrain: pentameter rhymed abab)
Thē lówĭng hĕrd wĭnd slówĭĕ ó'er thē léa,
Thē plówmān hómewārd plóds hĭs wĕarĭ wáy,
Ānd léaves thē wórlđ tō dárknĕss ānd tō mé. (Thomas Gray)

2. Trochaic: long-short, signified ' \sim as in:

Whĕre thē quiĕt-cóloured ĕnd ōf évenĭng smĭles, (trochaic hexameter: 6 feet per verse)
Mĭles ānd mĭles (catalectic dimeter: see below)
On thē sólĭtárĭ pástūres whĕre ōur shĕep (masculine rhymes)
Hālf-āslĕep
Tĭnkĕ hómewārd thró' thē twĭlĭght, stráy ōr stóp
As thĕy cróp-- (Robert Browning)

Notice the elision of the second syllable in “evening.” Earlier poets would have written “ev’ning.” Trochaic tetrameter is intrinsically sublime (as in Latin *Dies Iræ* or *Stabat Mater*):

Dóublĕ, dóublĕ, tóil ānd tróublĕ, (notice that “fire” is disyllabic)
Fĭrĕ búrn ānd cáldrōn búbbĕ. (Shakespeare)

When the final trochee is truncated by removing the short syllable, as in the case with Browning, above, we are left with catalectic lines and masculine rhymes:

Týgĕr! Týgĕr! búrnĭng brĭght (a quatrain of catalectic trochaic tetrameter)
ĩn thē fórrĕsts ōf thē níght, (rhymed aabb)
Whát ĩmmórtāl hānd ōr éye (“eye/symmetry” constitute an off-rhyme)
Cōuld fráme thĕ féarfŭl sýmmĕtrý? (Blake)

Notice the extra syllable in the final line. Is it still catalectic, or is it a regular iambic tetrameter line? To answer this we must dig into the sense of the poem.

¹Some would prefer to scan this: Tō bé ōr nót tō bé: || thāt ĩs thē quéstĭon. Emphasizing the caesura (marked ||) in the center, this inverts the fourth foot from an iamb to a trochee.

Triple Meters

3. Anapestic: short-short-long, signified $\sim \sim \prime$ as in:

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee. (anapestic tetrameter)
(Byron)

Much English comic verse embodies anapestic meter, like T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat* (1957):

The sun did not shine.
It was too wet to play.
So we sat in the house
All that cold, cold wet day. (a headless line: see below)
("Dr. Seuss")

and limericks since Edward Lear:

There was a young man from Japan
Whose limericks never would scan. (end-stopped line)
When we asked why this was,
He replied "It's because
I always try to fit as many syllables into the last line as I possibly can." (Anonymous)

A line lacking a syllable in the first foot, as lines 1 and 2 here, is said to be headless.

4. Dactylic: long-short-short signified $\prime \sim \sim$ as in this catalectic dactylic hexameter verse:

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of old, with voices sad and prophetic (Longfellow)

Greek elegiac verse consisted of a line of dactylic hexameter followed by one of dactylic pentameter. The rhythm is waltz-like and found in song lyrics such as:

Picture your self in a boat on a river with
Tangerine tree-ees and marmalade ski-ii-ees. (enjambement or run-on lines)
(Beatles)

The double-dactyl poses an especially tight form:

Hinterland, hinterland
Cedric D. Reverend
Couldn't be present to
Answer his phone.

Leaving this message, he,
Super sarcastically,
Trusts you'll record at the
Sound of the tone. (Reverend)

Other Feet

5. Spondaic: long-long signified ' ' as in:

Góod stróng thíck stúpěfýřng incěnse-smóke! (Browning)

Spondees are usually found nestled in a line with other feet. They have the effect of forcing a pause and emphasis.

Be near me when my light is low, (iambic tetrameter)
When the blóod créeps and the nérves príck . . . (Tennyson)

Or, from the poet who devised what he called sprung rhythm and marked his own verse:

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion (there are another two or
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, three unmarked spondees here)
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion. (Hopkins)

Accentual Syllabic vs. Strong-stress Meter

Since the 14th C English verse has scanned in the terms above. But earlier verse counted only strong-stressed syllables, ignoring the number of light-stressed ones. Lines were divided into hemistichs with a strong caesura (||) between each and further marked by alliteration:

With wínding hórn̄s || wínter hún̄ted
in the wéeping wóods, || wíld and rúthless;
sléet came sláshing || and slánting háil
from glówering héaven || gréy and súnless,
whístling whíplash || whírled by tēpest.
The flóods were fréed, || and fállow wát̄ers
swéeping séaward, || swóllen, ángry,
filled with flótsam, || fóaming, túrbid,
pásed in túmult. || The tēpest díed. (Tolkien)

Like Tolkien's poetry in *Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), Coleridge's medieval-gothic *Christabel* (1816) revives this form, each line possessing four strong stresses but varying in total syllables from four to twelve. Gerard Manley Hopkins takes the approach even further in the practice of what he called sprung rhythm:

I cáught this mórning mórning's mínion, kíng- (enjambéd)
dom of dáylight's dáuphin, dapple-dáwn-drawn Fálcon, in his ríding
Of the ról̄ling level undernéath him stéady áir, and stríding
Hígh there, how he rúng upon the réin of a wímpling wíng
In his éctasý! then óff, off fórh̄ on swíng,
As a skáte's heel sweeps smóoth on a bów-bend: the húrl and glíding
Rebúffed the bíg wínd. My héart in híding
Stírred for a bírd, – the achíeve of, the mástery of the thíng! (Hopkins)

Free Verse: see "prose." Robert Frost: "like playing tennis with the net down."