Demystifying Prosody
English Poetical Forms I: Metrical Feet
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Duple Meters

1. Iambic: short-long, signified ' ' as in: (unrhymed iambic pentameter: 5 feet per verse: blank verse)
   Tō bé ʻōr nó tō bé: thāt is thē qūstĭon.'
   Whethēr tīs nóblēr in thē mind tō sūffēr
   Thē slīngs ʻārōws ēn thē outrāgōus fōrtūnē,
   Or tō tāke ʻārms āgāinst thē sēa ʻōf trōublēs,
   And bŷ ʻoppōsīng ēnd thēm?
   (first foot inverted as a trochee: see below)
   (feminine endings: see below)
   (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 cūrfēw tōlls thē knēl ʻōf pártīng dāy
Thē lōwīng hērē wīnd slōwīly ʻōer thē léa,
Thē plōwmān hōmēwārd plōds hīs wēarē wāy,
And lēaves thē wōrld tō dārkēss ānd tō mē.
(Thomas Gray)

2. Trochaic: long-short, signified ' ' as in:
   (trochaic hexameter: 6 feet per verse)
   (catalectic dimeter: see below)
   (masculine rhymes)

Whēre thē quēt-cōlōured ēnd ʻōf ēvenīng smīles,
Mīles ānd mīles
On thē sōlītārī pāstūres whēre ōūr sēep
Hālf-āsliēp
Tīnkē hōmēwārd thrō thē twīlīght, strāy ʻōr stōp
As thēy crōp--
(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):

Dōublē, dōublē, tōīl ānd trōublē,
Fīrē būrn ānd cáldrōn būblē.
(notice that “fire” is disyllabic)
(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:

Tīgēr! Tīgēr! būnīng bright
In thē fōrēsts ōf thē nīght,
Whāt ʻāmmōrtāl hānd ōr ʻēye
Cōuld frāmē thē ʻfēərfūl sūmmētrēy?
(a quatrain of catalectic trochaic tetrameter)
(rhymed aabb)
(“eye/symmetry” constitute an off-rhyme)
(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.

'Some would prefer to scan this: Tō bé ʻōr nó tō bé:|| thāt tīs thē qūstĭon. 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 ˘˘˘ as in:

Thë ÆssyRëan câme dówn lîke thë wólfe on thë fôld,
And hîs côhôrts wêre glêamîng în pûrplë ând gôld;
And thë sheên ôf thëir spâërês wâs lîke stárês ôn thë sêa,
Whên thë blûe wâve rôlls nîghtlîy ôn dêep Gàllîlée.

(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):

Thë sôn dĬd nôt shine.
It wás too wët tô plày.
Só wë sât ín thë hóuse
All thât côld, côld wët dây.

(a headless line: see below)

(“Dr. Seuss”)

and limericks since Edward Lear:

Thëre wás â yôung mán frôm Jâpân
Whôse lmërîcks nèveër wôuld scân.
Whên wë asked whû thîs wâs,
Hë réplied “It’s bécâuse
I álways trô tô fît âs mânûô sỳllàblës ìntô thë lâst lîne âs I pósséiblô cân.”

(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 ˘˘˘ as in this catalectic dactylic hexameter verse:

Thís îs thë fôrêt prîméväl. Thë múrmûrông pînës ând thë hëmlôcks,
Bêardêd wîth môss, ând În gârmënts grëën, îndîstînt în thë twîlîght,
Stând lîke Drûîôs ôf ëld, wîth vóîcës sàd änd pronôphëîtô

(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 yôur sêlf În ã bôât Ôn ã rivër wîth
Tångêrîné trée-ëês ând mármâlåëd skîi-i-ës.

(enjambed or run-on lines)

(Beatles)

The double-dactyl poses an especially tight form:

Hîntêrlând, hûntêrlånd
Cëdrîc D.’ Rêvêrând
Côuldn’t˘ bê présënt tô
Answër hîs phône.

Lëavîng thîs mëssågë, hë,
Sûûrsârcâstïcâllÿ,
Trûsts yôu’ll rëcôrd åt thë
Sôund ôf thë tôné.

(Reverand)
Other Feet

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

Góod stróng thíck stúpěřyíng íncěnsē-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 príc . . .  
(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 three unmarked spondees here)
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
(Hopkins)
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

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 hórns || wíntər húnțed  
in the wéeplng wóods, || wíld and rúthless;  
sláét came sláshing || and slánting hál  
from glóweríng hēaven || grý and súnless,  
whístling whíplásh || whírled by témpest.  
The fláods were fíreed, || and fállo wáters  
wíéplng séáward, || swóllén, ángry,  
fülled wíth flótsam, || fómoıng, türbíd,  
pássed in tūmút. || The témpest díd.  
(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 mórníng mórníng’s mínión, kíng-  
dom of dáylght’s dáuphín, dapplé-dáwn-drawn Fálcon, in his rídíng  
Of the róllíng level undérnéáth hím stéady áir, and strídíng  
Hígh tíre, how híe rúng upon the réín of a wímpling wíng  
In híss écsťasy! thén óff, óff förth on swíng,  
As a skáte’s héeł sweepés smóoth on a bów-bend: the húrl and glíding  
Rébúffed the bíg wínd. My hórnt in hídíng  
Stírréd for a bírd, – the achíeve of, the mástéry of the thíng!  
(Hopkins)

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