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Prosody, Elizabethan

Like a classical comedy, Elizabethan prosody begins in a state of unhappy instability and ends in one of satisfying and dynamic equilibrium. Successful versification involves the harmonization of fixed metrical law and variable speech rhythm, and in the middle of the sixteenth century, these two elements were at loggerheads in English poetry. Due to linguistic confusions that had arisen during the transition from Middle to Modern English, poets no longer understood the fluidly iambic prosody Geoffrey Chaucer had developed. Though they continued to write in iambic measure, they had lost the ability to manage it flexibly--particularly so as far as the decasyllabic line was concerned--and their rhythms were either disorganized and awkward or correct but wooden. Nowhere is this unfortunate dichotomy clearer than in Thomas Wyatt's poems. The texts he left in manuscript at his death in 1542 are often metrically confused, yet they are hardly improved by the vigor-draining regularizations that they underwent when Richard Tottel edited and published them in his *Miscellany* of 1557. Complicating the metrical malaise was the concern that native prosody, which observed syllabic accent, was incapable of great poetry, and that if English verse were to advance, it would

have to adopt, as ancient verse had, a prosody governed by syllabic quantity (i.e., syllabic length or duration).

For several decades, poets grappled with these and related issues, and it is impossible to overestimate the genius of their collective effort. By 1600, most of the practical and theoretical problems had been resolved, and writers were producing a poetry to rival, as Ben Jonson would later say in connection with William Shakespeare, "all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome / Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come."

This triumph involved several factors. First, poets gradually rediscovered the suppleness of the iambic line and learned that using it effectively entailed not rigid replications of the prosodic grid, but rather continual modulations of its basic pattern. To be sure, the grid could be followed exactly, as in this iambic pentameter, which consists of five rear-stressed disyllabic units,

To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run

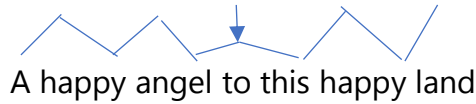
(Edmund Spenser, "Mother Hubbard's Tale," 905)

or the grid could be followed closely, as in this pentameter, which features a fairly regular alternation of weak and strong syllables:

Although the course be turned some other way

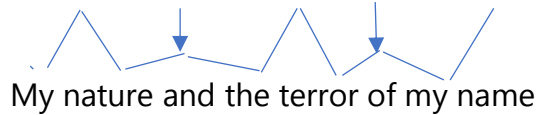
(Walter Raleigh, "The Ocean's Love to Cynthia," 82)

Yet the sole requirement of an iamb is that its second syllable be weightier than its first, and, as poets discovered, it is possible to maintain the iambic fluctuation without making every metrically accented peak an Everest or every metrically unaccented dip a Grand Canyon. Some peaks can be lower than other peaks:



A happy angel to this happy land

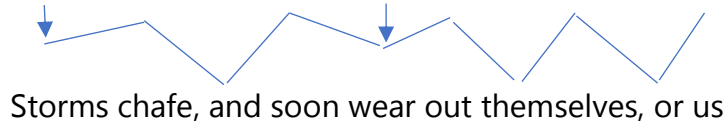
(John Davies, *Nosce Teipsum*, "Dedication," 30)



My nature and the terror of my name

(Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Part 1*, 1957)

Some valleys may be higher than other valleys:



Storms chafe, and soon wear out themselves, or us

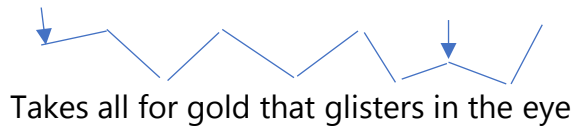
(John Donne, "The Calm," 5)



Hoise sails, weigh anchors up, plough up the seas

(George Peele, "A Farewell to Sir John Norris and Sir Francis Drake,"
51)


For that matter, a valley in one place may be higher than a peak in another:



Takes all for gold that glisters in the eye

(Barnaby Googe, "To Alexander Neville," 12)

What is more, since the only requirement of an iamb is that its second syllable be weightier than its first, a light iamb can be followed with a heavy one to create a continuous rise of rhythm over two feet. (In the example that follows, the rise is nicely expressive of the phenomenon the poet is describing.)



With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies

(Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, Sonnet 31, 1)

Equally important, in exploring these various modulatory capacities, poets learned that modern iambic meters were not restricted, to the extent that ancient

meters had been, to a particular tones and genres, but could accommodate a wide range of styles, from the grand to the melodic to the colloquial. And this did much to dispel anxieties that the native prosody might require overhauling or complexification before it could deal with sophisticated subject matter.

Another factor crucial to the triumph of native meter involves the realization of the centrality of monosyllabic words in English. Many Elizabethan writers on prosody note that English abounds in monosyllabic words; and even Roger Ascham and Thomas Campion, who advocate a quantitative metric for English, perceive that its monosyllables will forever prevent its being tuned to the well-knit polysyllabic intricacies of ancient quantitative measures like the dactylic hexameter. By the same token, poets grow increasingly aware that, however unsuited English monosyllables are to classical meter, they are extraordinarily handy for the native prosodic system. More specifically, poets realize that any monosyllabic word can, given the right context, serve as either a metrical beat or a metrical offbeat. As George Gascoigne puts it in 1575 treatise, *Certain Notes of Instruction Concerning the Making of Verse or Rhyme in English*: “[W]ords of one syllable will . . . easily fall to be short or long [Gascoigne is actually speaking of accent rather than length] as occasion requireth.” This awareness in turn produces a liberating distinction between ancient meter and modern meter: whereas ancient prosody can classify syllables as short or long according to their phonemic and phonetic nature, stress in English is not so abstractly determinable, but varies with sense and verbal environment. Admittedly, this distinction clarified that modern prosody could never aspire to the exactitude of ancient metric. But the distinction also established that English poets could employ the metrical grid not only to organize rhythm, but also to point meaning, and could thereby achieve a fluidity and rhetorical focus impossible under quantitative rules.

Illustration of this point is supplied by Shakespeare’s comment (Sonnet 129, 13-14) about the destructive consequences of yielding to illicit sexual passion:

x / x / x / x / x /
All this | the world | well knows, | yet none | knows well

To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

In the scanned line, both the third and fifth feet consist of the adverb "well" plus the verb "knows," with the order of the words transposed from one foot to the other. And, paradoxically, both feet are iambs. Shakespeare initially points out that while everyone *knows* that lust is wrong, this knowledge is not always *sufficient* to prevent dishonorable conduct: "All this the world well *knows*, yet none knows *well*."

Even the great prosodic question the Elizabethans could not settle--to rhyme or not to rhyme--proved fruitful in its irresolution. However hagglingly futile the debate about rhyme may at first blush appear--the pro-rhymers praising the device for bestowing surpassing beauties of modern poems, the anti-rhymers damning it as a corrupt embellishment that classical Greek and Latin writers sensibly avoided--the argument helped insure that Modern English poetry would enjoy lively traditions of both rhymed and rhymeless verse. And if on the one hand the Elizabethan period witnesses a flowering of rhymed verse in the modes of sonnet-lyric (e.g., Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*), romantic epic (e.g., Spenser's *Fairie Queene*), narrative (e.g., Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*), elegy and epigram (e.g., the early poems of Donne and Jonson), on the other hand the period sees the development of a vital school of blank verse. From its modest beginnings in Henry Howard's translations (circa 1540) of Books 2 and 4 of *The Aeneid* and in Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1561), blank verse increases in significance until establishing itself, in the plays of Thomas Kyd, Robert Greene, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, as *the* medium for dramatic verse.

It is fascinating to compare the Elizabethan era with that other great epoch of prosodic restlessness, the twentieth century. Whereas the Elizabethans reconciled meter and rhythm, many twentieth-century poets subordinated the former to the latter or

divorced the two altogether. Whereas the Elizabethans conducted a spirited dialectic with earlier prosodic tradition--assimilating useful elements and discarding those that proved unsuited to their language--twentieth-century poets all too often conducted their experiments on the negative principle of avoiding the past. Finally, whereas Elizabethan practice produced a vigorous consensus that allowed diverse voices a common basis of technique, twentieth-century verse grew decade by decade more fragmented. These comparisons not only underscore the Elizabethans' achievement, but also suggest the lessons that that achievement may hold for poetry in the new millennium.

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