

## Introduction to English Meter

- I. Chief Meters of English Verse
- II. Relationship and Cooperation Between Fixed Meter and Variable Speech Rhythm
- III. Side Note on Rising Rhythm Across Two Feet
- IV. Effect of Verbal, Grammatical, and Rhetorical Context on English Meter
- V. Principal Metrical Variations in Iambic Verse
- VI. Loose Iambic Verse
- VII. Note on Elision
- VIII. Non-Iambic Meters
- IX. Uses and Pleasures of Meter

### I. Chief Meters of English Verse

English-language poetry is written mostly in iambic meters. “Meter” (from the Greek *metron*) means “measure” and denotes the rhythmical organization of verse lines. “Iambic” refers to a rhythm that alternates between relatively lightly stressed syllables and relatively heavily stressed ones. Because it suits English speech more naturally and flexibly than other rhythms, iambic has been the principal mode of English poetry from the time of Geoffrey Chaucer (14th c.) to the present.

Below are short passages from poems (the final one is a complete two-line epigram) that illustrate the chief meters of English verse. All the selections feature iambic rhythm. The lines, however, differ in length. The shortest has two feet and four syllables. The longest has five feet and ten syllables. (A “foot” is the basic rhythmical unit of a verse line; in iambic verse in English, this unit consists of a metrically unaccented syllable followed by a metrically accented one.) As Robert Frost once remarked, prefacing a proposed collection of his work for younger readers, poets follow “The measured way, ... so many feet to the line, seldom less than two or more than five in our language” (*Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, edited by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson [New York: Library of America, 1995], 847).

Who knows his will?

Who knows what mood

His hours fulfil?

His griefs conclude?

(J. V. Cunningham, “Meditation on a Memoir,” 1-4)

How frightened you were once

--And not so long ago--  
 When late one night we took  
 Our pathway homeward through  
 The churchyard where you saw  
 Grey gravestones row on row.  
 (Dick Davis, "Mariam Darbandi," 1-6)

This youth too long has heard the break  
 Of waters in a land of change.  
 He goes to see what suns can make  
 From soil more indurate and strange.  
 (Louise Bogan, "A Tale," 1-4)

I rang them up while touring Timbuctoo,  
 Those bosom chums to whom you're known as "Who?"  
 (X. J. Kennedy, "To Someone Who Insisted I Look Up Someone")

To clarify the structure of these selections, we can scan them. ("Scan" comes from the Latin *scandere*, "to climb"; the etymology of the word suggests the process of moving up or along, and analyzing step by step, a verse line.) Scanning lines involves dividing them into their component feet and assigning a metrical value to each syllable. A metrically unaccented syllable is conventionally noted with an "x," a metrically accented syllable with a "/." Lines are named with reference to their prevailing rhythm and number of feet.

x /      x / Who knows   his will? x /      x / Who knows   what mood x /      x / His hours   fulfil? x /      x / His griefs   conclude?	IAMBIC DIMETER
---	----------------

x /      x /      x / How fright   ened you   were once x /      x /      x / --And not   so long   ago - x /      x /      x / When late   one night   we took x /      x /      x / Our path   way home   ward through x /      x /      x / The church   yard where   you saw	IAMBIC TRIMETER
---	-----------------

x /        x /        x /  
 Grey grave | stones row | on row.

x /        x /        x /        x /  
 This youth | too long | has heard | the break

x /        x /        x /        x /  
 Of wa | ters in | a land | of change.

IAMBIC TETRAMETER

x /        x /        x /        x /  
 He goes | to see | what suns | can make

x /        x /        x /        x /  
 From soil | more in | durate | and strange.

x /        x /        x /        x /        x /  
 I rang | them up | while tour | ing Tim | buctoo,

IAMBIC PENTAMETER

x /        x /        x /        x /        x /  
 Those bos | om chums | to whom | you're known | as "Who?"

We should bear in mind several points about scansion. First, scansion divides lines according to *units of rhythm, not units of sense*. Scansion, in other words, treats a line merely and abstractly as a row of syllables. It does not consider the ways in which the syllables are clustered into words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. Hence, though we sometimes find lines in which divisions between feet coincide with divisions between words,

He goes | to see | what suns | can make

we just as often find lines in which they do not. For instance, in the second line of Kennedy's epigram, "touring" crosses the boundary between the third and fourth feet and "Timbuctoo" crosses the boundary between the fourth and fifth feet:

I rang | them up | while tour <|> ing Tim <|> buctoo

Another point is that the only requirement of an iambic foot is that its second syllable be weightier than its first. The *degree* of difference is, for purposes of scansion and metrical analysis, irrelevant. Hence some iambs may consist of two relatively light syllables (as long as the second still is heavier than the first) and other iambs may consist of two relatively weighty syllables (again, as long as the second still is heavier than the first).

We can make this point clearer by supplementing the conventional two-level notation of scansion with a numerical four-level register, using 4 to stand for strong stress, 3 to stand for semi-strong stress, 2 for semi-weak stress, and 1 for weak stress. With this supplementary notation, we can indicate that, though all the feet in the following tetrameter are iambs, the second foot is lighter than the others:

1 4 1 2 1 4 1 4  
 Of wa | ters in | a land | of change

Similarly, we can demonstrate that the first foot in the following iambic trimeter is fairly heavy. (The second foot is perhaps relatively heavy, too.)

3 4 2? 4 1 4  
 Grey grave | stones row | on row.

A third point—it's related to and implicit in the second—is that we determine whether a syllable is metrically unaccented or accented by comparing it solely to the other syllable or syllables in the foot in which it appears. We do not weigh it against all the other syllables in the line or the poem. Consequently, a metrically unaccented syllable at one point in a line may actually carry more speech emphasis than a metrically accented syllable at another point. Consider, for example, this line:

Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat  
 (Frost, "Hyla Brook," 11)

Here "leaves," the metrical off-beat of foot two, actually has more speech stress than "by" the metrical beat of foot four:

1 4 3 4 1 4 1 2 1 4  
 x / x / x / x / x /  
 Of dead | leaves stuck | togeth | er by | the heat

The line, however, remains conventionally iambic, since the poet maintains the fundamental lighter-to-heavier fluctuation and since the syllables in each individual foot reflect the lighter-to-heavier relationship characteristic of iambs.

## II. Relationship and Cooperation Between Fixed Meter and Variable Speech Rhythm

As these observations suggest, the fluctuation between lighter and heavier syllables in iambic verse is rarely a uniform ka BOOM, ka BOOM, ka BOOM, ka BOOM, ka BOOM. Instead, the fluctuation involves a much more subtle and fluid lighter-to-heavier movement. Sometimes the difference of stress levels between syllables is great; sometimes it is only slight. And what good poets do, when they write iambic verse, is to maintain the fluctuating pattern while continually modulating it from within. They follow the basic form, but realize it in ever-varying ways.

It is from this interplay between the unchanging metrical pattern and the many-shaded rhythms of natural speech—this ongoing reconciliation between the steady underlying pulse of the meter and the variable phrases, clauses, and sentences riding over it—that iambic verse draws its vitality.

Grasping this relationship between meter and rhythm is probably the single most important factor in understanding English versification. Explaining the relationship can be tricky because meter and rhythm are distinguishable in analysis but integrated and inseparable in practice. We don't hear meter with one ear and rhythm with another. Rather, we simultaneously register the general metrical pattern and the specific rhythmical manifestations of it. For example, in reading the iambic pentameters below, we recognize, in their different rhythmical contours, the single meter that they realize:

Poor vanity, so quaint and yet so brave  
(Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Veteran Sirens," 18)

I'll tell the court the truth for his divorce  
(Robert Lowell, "Katherine's Dream," 16; from *Between the Porch and the Altar*)

I walk the floor, read, watch a cop-show, drink,  
(Thom Gunn, "Her Pet," 1)

She told it simply, but she faltered there  
(Rhina Espaillat, "Butchering," 14)

"On leaving, strip the bed. Enjoy your stay."  
(Leslie Monsour, "The House Sitter," 20)

We do not need to become wizards of theory to learn English versification. We can tune our ears to accurate meter simply by reading lots of good metrical poems. And this was mostly how poets mastered their craft prior to the prosodic turbulence of the twentieth century – a turbulence that brought fresh and valuable ideas into our poetry but cut poets off from fruitful literary traditions. If we readers and poets today sometimes have to learn meter consciously, it is because we have lost the ready familiarity with metrical practice that our ancestors had.

### III. Side Note on Rising Rhythm Across Two Feet

From time to time, we will encounter in iambic verse two adjacent feet whose syllables represent four rising degrees of stress. (The first line cited below is, we might note, rhythmically expressive of what the poet is describing.)

1     2     3     4  
With how | sad steps, | O moon, | thou climb'st | the skies  
(Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, 31.1)

1 2 3 4  
The pal | lor of | girls' brows | shall be | their pall  
(Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth, 12)

1 2 3 4  
They drive, | and squan | der the | huge Bel | gian fleet  
(John Dryden, *Annus Mirabilis*, 266)

1 2 3 4  
One's glance | could cross | the bor | ders of | three states  
(Hart Crane, "Quaker Hill," 26)

Strictly speaking, the analyzed feet remain iambic, since the second syllable in each is stronger than the first. However, because we have a light iamb followed by a heavy one, the overall rise and fall of the line is briefly suspended in favor of continuous ascent.

#### IV. Effect of Verbal, Grammatical, and Rhetorical Context on English Meter

In ancient Greek and Latin prosody, which measures syllable length rather than syllable stress, the metrical nature of syllables can be determined, for the most part, on the basis of phonemics and phonetics. If a syllable has a long vowel or a diphthong, it is long. If it has a short vowel but is "closed" by a consonant, it is also long. Otherwise, it is short. Things are not so simple, however, with our stress-based English meters. We cannot abstractly categorize the metrical values of syllables to the degree that the ancients could, since verbal, grammatical, and rhetorical context can affect stress – especially as it relates to monosyllabic words.

An illuminating instance of the effect of rhetorical context appears in Shakespeare's comment (*Sonnets*, 129.13-14) about the destructive consequences of yielding to illicit sexual passion. (Though I'll focus on the first of the lines below, I should mention with regard to the second that, in Shakespeare's time, "heaven" was said as a monosyllable and could be treated metrically as a monosyllable or a disyllable. Hence, though the line may seem to us to have an extra syllable, for Shakespeare it does not.)

All this | the world | well knows | but none | knows well  
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell

Here the third foot of the divided line consists of the adverb "well" plus the verb "knows"; then, two feet later, Shakespeare gives us another foot with the same words transposed. And, paradoxically, both feet are iambs. Shakespeare initially states that everyone *knows* that lust is wrong, and then sadly adds that such knowledge is not

always *sufficient* to prevent dishonorable conduct:

All this | the world | well *knows*, | but none | knows *well*

Shakespeare’s line also illustrates one advantage of understanding metrical structure. It enables us to hear more readily, accurately, and sensitively than we otherwise could what the poet is saying.

Another illustrative case – this one involving grammatical rather than rhetorical context – appears in Frost’s description (“The Egg and the Machine,” 5-6) of a railroad-hating man who regrets not having sabotaged some track when he had the chance:

He wished when he had had the track alone  
He had attacked it with a club or stone

In the third foot of the first line of this couplet, “had” changes its metrical nature because the poet is writing in the past perfect tense. The first “had” is merely auxiliary, whereas the second “had” – the past participle of “have” – is the main verb:

x /

He wished | when he | had had | the track | alone

Some readers may note that, in the couplet’s second line, the auxiliary “had” occupies a metrical beat, and this results from its verbal context or environment. At this point, “had” is flanked fore and aft by relatively weak syllables – the pronoun “He” and the unaccented syllable of “attacked.” As linguists tells us, it is difficult to say a succession of syllables with exactly the same degree of stress, and when we speak three light syllables in a row, we tend to “promote” the middle one a little. To be sure, the auxiliary “had” doesn’t take as much actual speech stress as the accented second syllable of the main verb “attacked.” But the auxiliary has more stress than its immediate neighbors and therefore takes a metrical beat:

x / x / x / x / x /

He had attacked it with a club or stone

A similar promotion, resulting from the verbal context, occurs in the line below. Here, the relatively light preposition “to” is promoted to a metrical beat as a result of being preceded by the unaccented syllable of “turnip” and followed by the article “the”:

x / x / x / x / x /

And gnaw | the fro | zen tur | nip to | the ground  
(John Clare, “Sheep in Winter,” 3)

Conversely, a weighty word may be metrically “demoted” if flanked by other weighty words. In the following line, for example, “warm” is a metrical off-beat because it’s preceded the verb “think” and followed by the noun “days”:

x /    x /    x /    x /    x /  
Until | they think | warm days | will nev | er cease  
(John Keats, “To Autumn,” 10)

The preceding remarks imply point that is worth stating explicitly. Any monosyllabic word in English can serve – given the right verbal, grammatical, or rhetorical context – as metrically accented or metrically unaccented. For instance, though the definite and indefinite articles are usually metrically unaccented, they may bear a metrical accent if they are flanked by other light syllables. In the line below, “the” is the metrically accented syllable of the third foot:

Salt winds that ruffle the surrounding firs  
(Richard Wilbur, “The House,” 8)

And “a” is the metrically accented syllable of the fourth foot of this line:

This one (she’d laughed, embarrassed) a surprise  
(Catherine Tufariello, “Fruitless,” 11)

Not long ago, A. E. Stallings raised, in a Facebook post, the topic of “the” serving as a metrically accented syllable; and as she and her correspondents observed, once you’re alerted to the phenomenon you start finding instances of it in all sorts of places. Indeed, her own “Lost and Found” features a line (35.7) in which the definite article appears in the metrically accented position of the second foot (as well appearing as the metrically unaccented syllable in the fifth foot):

To live in the sublunary, the swift

By the same token, though monosyllabic words with semantic weight will generally appear in metrically accented positions, they not infrequently serve as metrical off-beats. We saw this with respect to the adjective “warm” in the line above from Keats. And we see this in the line below with respect to the verb “look,” which is demoted as a result of being flanked on either side by other strong monosyllables. (Also notice that the conjunction “and” is promoted to a metrical beat by being flanked by light syllables.)

They make the lobby and the street look real  
(Henri Coulette, “The Extras,” 15)



And in this line, the nouns “day” and “crowds” are metrically unaccented:

Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view  
(Claude McKay, “The Lynching,” 9)

It may also be worth making explicit that sometimes an iambic pentameter may have as few as two heavily stressed syllables:

1 4 1 2 1 2 1 4 1 2  
x / x / x / x / x /  
Involuntary immortality  
(Vikram Seth, “The North Temple Tower,” 10)

And sometimes we may encounter a pentameter with as many as ten syllables with fairly heavy stress, as in this line, which takes us through a year, from one winter into another:

3 4 3 4 3 4 3 4 3 4  
x / x / x / x / x /  
White snow, green buds, green lawn, red leaves, white snow  
(Joshua Mehigan, “Here,” 8)

## V. Principal Metrical Variations in Iambic Verse

Historically, there are two main metrical variations in iambic verse. The first involves the “substitution” of a trochee (a foot consisting of a metrically accented syllable followed by a metrically unaccented one) at the beginning of the line:

/ x x / x / x / x /  
Leaving the stations of her body there  
(Richard Wilbur, “Transit,” 11)

Trochaic substitutions can also appear elsewhere in the line, though such substitutions are less frequent than those that occur in the first foot. In pentameters, the most common place that these latter substitutions appear is in the third or fourth foot, usually following a pause in sense, which may or may not be marked by punctuation:

x / x / x / x / x x /  
In silence through a wood | gloomy | and still  
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 4.447)  
x / x / / x x / x /  
To laugh or fail, | diffi | dent, wonder-starred  
(Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Children of the Poor,” 1.8)

Much rarer are trochaic substitutions in the second foot, though they occasionally feature in, for instance, Philip Larkin's metrical practice:

x / / x x / x / x /  
 As when, | thawing, | the rigid landscape weeps  
 ("Faith Healing," 28)

x / / x x / x / x /  
 While girls, | gripping | their handbags tighter, stared  
 (The Whitsun Weddings," 64)

Once in a blue moon, we may find a trochee in the final foot, as we do in a line (26) from Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning." (The 120-line poem is otherwise composed in beautifully conventional pentameters, which suggests that Stevens deliberately aimed, in introducing this trochee, for a disruptively expressive effect.)

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;  
 Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued  
 x / x / x / x / x  
 Elations when the forest blooms; | gusty  
 Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights.

The second common variation in iambic verse is the so-called feminine (or "hypermetrical") ending—the addition or appearance of an extra unaccented syllable at the end of a line:

x / x / x / x / x / (x)  
 Remove from her the means of all annoyance  
 (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.1.79)

Sometimes, a line will have both a trochaic first foot and a feminine ending:

/ x x / x / x / x / (x)  
 Often rebuk'd, but always back returning  
 (Emily Brontë, "Stanzas," 1)

Roman Jakobson once suggested that these two common variations evolved because, situated at the beginnings and endings of line, they do not really disrupt the rhythm. At the beginning of the line, there's generally a grammatical juncture or a pause in movement, and consequently the reader's ear can assimilate a variation there without difficulty. No developing pattern of rhythm is broken. (The more unusual trochaic substitutions illustrated by Larkin's lines and Stevens's also occur after grammatical pauses.) Similarly, the extra unaccented syllable at the line end does not interrupt the

fluctuating iambic rhythm, but rather just continues it one syllable beyond where it customarily ends.

However these two variations evolved, they have proved of great practical assistance to poets. Many English words of two or more syllables start with a heavy syllable or end with a light one. Though such words can be integrated into the middle of the iambic line, it is useful also to have the option of setting them at the head of the line or at the end of it. The conventions of the trochaic first foot and of the feminine ending allow poets these alternative placements. Consider the following line (115) from Frost's "Generations of Men":

Making allowance, making due allowance

This line twice features the fore-stressed disyllabic word "making" and the middle-stressed trisyllabic word "allowance." The second time "making" appears, it is integrated iambically into the interior of the line; however, the convention of the trochaic first foot lets Frost position the word at the line-beginning as well. When "allowance" first appears, Frost merges it into the iambic rhythm of the line's interior; but the convention of the feminine ending permits Frost to employ the word at the line-ending, too:

/ x    x /    x        /    x        /    x / (x)  
Making | allow | ance, mak | ing due | allowance

As this analysis indicates, in most cases when poets introduce into their verse first-foot or mid-line trochees, or hypermetrical endings, they do so simply for the sake of prosodic convenience. Yet the variations can also produce expressive effects. We register expressive effects of feminine endings mainly in rhymed verse, and for this reason I treat such effects not here but in the essay about rhymes and stanzas on this website.

As far as expressive effects that result from trochees being substituted for iambs, Stevens's comment about gusty emotions on wet roads can serve as an example: the disruption of rhythm in Stevens's line suggests the excitement that love can produce in our lives. Another expressive effect resulting from a trochaic substitution appears in *King Lear* (3.6.105-106) when Edgar, wandering the countryside disguised as a mad beggar, encounters Lear, who, like Edgar, has been cruelly driven from home and shelter. Up to this point, Edgar has been alone in his peril and humiliation, and this isolation has intensified his pain to the point where it feels unendurable. But now his sympathies are wakened, and his sorrows are mitigated, by his recognition that his king has suffered the same fate he has; and he says:

How light and portable my pain seems now,

When that which makes me bend makes the King bow.

The first eight feet of this couplet are steadily iambic (though the light third foot of the first line – a line which is itself about the lightening of the speaker’s plight – is a nicely expressive touch); and this steadiness renders the change in rhythm, when the trochee appears after “bend,” all the more forcible. Further, the accented syllable of the trochee is the same word – “makes” – that was the accented syllable of the iamb that appeared earlier in the line. This sets up a grammatical parallelism – “makes me bend” being answered by “makes the King bow” – which Shakespeare further emphasizes by the bend/bow alliteration that points the metrical accents of the third and fifth feet. The fifth foot is interesting in itself, in that the word “King” has considerable speech stress, but is nevertheless metrically subordinate to “bow.” And this appropriate in context because Edgar is speaking of the reduced majesty of Lear and of the out-of-whack situation in which he, who by rights should receive the deference of his subjects, is obliged to bow.

In Charles Gullans’s “John Wilkes,” we see how the first-foot trochee can contribute to meaning. Gullans’s poem explores the life of the great radical politician, who boldly championed liberty and freedom in press during the reign of George III but whose hotheadedness and skirt-chasing undermined his career and effectiveness. Gullans writes the poem in eight cross-rhyming pentameter quatrains. Here are the fourth and fifth, which address Wilkes’s character. (In the next-to-last line of the passage, Gullans evidently treats “contemptuous” as three syllables by elision, with the third and fourth syllables of the word glided together.)

“I have no minor vices,” though a boast,  
Was license to quick, brittle fools to laugh;  
Then teaching what hyperbole may cost,  
His wit pursued him like an epitaph.

No hypocrite, his vices all well known,  
“Godless, but never womanless an hour,”  
Hard and contemptuous, still the man had grown  
Hating restriction and abusive power.

This passage, like the larger poem, runs mostly in nicely modulated iambs but the last three lines open with trochees. These give the lines, at their outset, a harder propulsion and convey in their rhythm something of Wilkes’s admirably tough passion and less admirable arrogance and inflexibility.

## VI. Loose Iambic Verse

“All that can be done with words is soon told. So also with meters – particularly in

our language where there are virtually but two, loose iambic and strict iambic.”  
(Frost, *Collected Poems, Plays, and Prose*, 776)

Loose iambic verse features lines with extra metrically unaccented syllables. To put it another way, loose iambic involves iambic verse in which anapestic feet are here and there substituted for iambic feet. (An anapest is a foot with two metrically unaccented syllables, followed by a metrically accented syllable.)

Loose iambs have been used mostly in rhymed verse in shorter measures. Shorter measures are less likely than longer ones to be undermined or confused by extra unaccented syllables, because the identity of the line can be maintained by the rhyme, by the regular beat-count, and by the tight compass in which both are operating. Thomas Hardy’s “The Wound,” which has an iambic dimeter base, exemplifies the loose iambic mode:

x /            x x /  
I climbed | to a crest,  
          x /        x /  
          And, fog- | festooned,  
      x /        x /  
The sun | lay west  
          x x /        x /  
          Like a crim | son wound:

x x /        x /  
Like that wound | of mine  
          x /        x /  
          Of which | none knew,  
      x x /        x x /  
For I’d giv | en no sign  
          x x /        x /  
          That it pierced | me through.

Though six of this poem’s sixteen feet are anapests, the iambic current is clear. And because the ear can easily locate the two metrical beats in each line, and because rhymes point the line-endings, the additional light syllables do not obscure the measure.

Other outstanding poems in loose iambic dimeter include Louise Bogan’s “Knowledge” and Mark van Doren’s “Good Night.” Fine poems in loose iambic trimeter include William Butler Yeats’s “Fiddler of Dooney” and Wilbur’s “The Ride.” Excellent poems in loose iambic tetrameter include Robert Browning’s “Meeting at Night” and “Parting at Morning,” Yeats’s “The Song of the Old Mother,” Frost’s “Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” and Janet Lewis’s “No-Winter Country.” Loose iambic poems which mix lines of different length include Walter Scott’s “Proud

Maisie" (trimeters and dimeters), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "A Musical Instrument" (tetrameters and trimeters), Hardy's "The Oxen" (tetrameters and trimeters), and Gavin Ewart's amusing "2001: The Tennyson/Hardy Poem" (tetrameters and dimeters).

Generally, poets have avoided adding extra syllables to the pentameter. The line is so flexible to begin with that additional elements may cause it to sag. Still, loose iambic pentameters are employed to good effect by Frost in "Mowing" and "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations." And Hardy's "Afterwards" features a cross-rhyming quatrain whose first and third lines are loose iambic hexameters and whose second and fourth lines are loose iambic pentameters.

## VII. Note on Elision

"Elision" refers to the contracting or slurring, for the sake of metrical convenience, of two syllables into one. This practice occurs chiefly under one of two conditions. The first involves adjacent vowels, which may be either within the same word or facing one another across the gap between words. (In the scansion below, an arrow marks where the two syllables are blended together.)

x / x / > / x / x /  
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh  
 (Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," 78)

> / x / x / x / x /  
 T' explore a passage hid from human tract  
 (Thomas Campion, "Elegy on Prince Henry," 55)

The second condition under which elision chiefly takes place concerns pairs of lightly stressed vowels that appear in the same trisyllabic or polysyllabic word and that are separated by one of the liquid consonants ("l" or "r") or by one of the nasal consonants ("n" or "m"). In such cases, poets may, if they wish, syncopate away the first light vowel:

x / x / x / x / x /  
 The silent court and op'ning square explore  
 (John Gay, *Trivia*, 1.9)

x / x / x / x / x /  
 In all the zones, the temp'rate, hot, and cold  
 (Anne Bradstreet, "In Honour of Du Bartas," 61)

x / x / x / x / x /  
From strong Patroclus' hand the jav'lin fled  
(Alexander Pope, *The Iliad of Homer*, 16.566)

x / x / x / x / x /  
The milky poison of each ven'mous weed  
(William Mure, *Dido and Aeneas*, 3.108)

As the examples above indicate, earlier poets frequently note elisions orthographically, by means of a metrical apostrophe. One reason it helps us as readers to understand elision is that contemporary editions of earlier poets often feature modernized spellings that remove the original apostrophes; and unless we're on our toes, the alterations may leave us confused as to metrical structures of lines involved. Unless we understand elision, we might mistakenly think, when reading in a contemporary anthology line 61 of Gray's "Elegy,"

The applause of listening senates to command

that the poet intended a line of 12 syllables, whereas what he originally wrote and published was a regular iambic pentameter:

> / x / x / x / x /  
Th' applause of list'ning senates to command

There's a related issue. Because the metrical apostrophe has long since fallen out of fashion, we should be alert, when we see a modern or contemporary poet writing a line that appears to have an extra syllable, to the possibility that one of the syllables is contractible. For instance, when Frost writes in "The Mountain,"

But what would interest you about the brook

we might guess that he is treating "interest" not in its full three-syllable form but in its syncopated two-syllable form--"in-trist." And when we listen to Frost read the line on the Library of Congress recording of his work, we can hear that this is what he's doing:

x / x / x / x / x /  
But what would int(e)rest you about the brook

As I remark in *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*, elision is a thorny topic. It reflects both natural speech habits – English is notoriously subject to clipping – and conventions of a purely literary sort, which have less to do with native pronunciation than with the practices of ancient Greek and Latin (and modern Italian and French) poets.

Before leaving this subject, we should recall a point made earlier. Elision is, in English poetry, *optional*. English poets have historically been at liberty to treat contractible syllables as contracted or uncontracted, according to their metrical convenience.

### VIII. Non-Iambic Meters

The two chief non-iambic rhythms in English poetry are trochaic and anapestic. As has been mentioned, a trochee is a foot consisting of a metrically accented syllable followed by a metrically unaccented one, and an anapest has two metrically unaccented syllables followed by a metrically accented syllable.

Here is an epigram in trochaic tetrameter by Henry Charles Beeching (1859-1919); the epigram satirizes Benjamin Jowett, a 19th-century Oxford don and translator of Plato:

First come I; my name is Jowett.  
 There's no knowledge but I know it.  
 I am Master of this college:  
 What I don't know isn't knowledge.

/ x      / x      / x      / x  
 First come | I; my | name is | Jowett  
 / x      / x      / x      / x  
 There's no | knowledge | but I | know it.  
 / x      / x      / x      / x  
 I am | Master | of this | college  
 / x      / x      / x      / x  
 What I | don't know | isn't | knowledge.

(Alfred Tennyson once commented that this epigram was unfair because Jowett, though having a powerful personality, did not claim to be omniscient.)

A famous American poem in trochaics is Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, which is in unrhymed trochaic tetrameters:

/ x      / x      / x      / x  
 By the | shores of | Gitchee | Gumee  
 / x      / x      / x      / x  
 By the | shining | Big-Sea | -Water,  
 / x      / x      / x      / x  
 Stood the | wigwam | of No | komis,  
 / x      / x      / x      / x  
 Daughter | of the | Moon, No | komis. (3.64-67)

Poets who rhyme in trochaic verse often drop the final unaccented syllable from the



line. This procedure is called “catalexis” (a word related to the Greek *katalektikos*, “incomplete”). This spares the poet the necessity of using disyllabic rhymes, which tend to jingle. Stopping at the seventh position, that is, allows the poet to rhyme securely on a single metrically accented syllable. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Best,” a poem in catalectic trochaic tetrameter, illustrates this procedure. (I’ll use a caret to indicate the omitted final syllable of the measure.)

/ x / x / x / ^  
 What's the best thing in the world?  
 / x / x / x / ^  
 June-rose, by May-dew impearl'd;  
 / x / x / x / ^  
 Sweet south-wind, that means no rain  
 / x /x / x / ^  
 Truth, not cruel to a friend;  
 / x / x / x / ^  
 Pleasure, not in haste to end;  
 / x / x / x / ^  
 Beauty, not self-decked and curl'd  
 / x / x / x / ^  
 Till its pride is over-plain . . .

Poets sometimes mix catalectic trochaic tetrameters and acatalectic (i.e. complete) trochaic ones, as Samuel Johnson does in his “Short Song of Congratulation”:

/ x / x / x / x  
 Long-ex | pected | one and | twenty  
 / x / x / x / ^  
 Ling'ring | year at | last has | flown,  
 / x / x / x / x  
 Pomp and | Pleasure, | Pride and | Plenty,  
 / x / x / x / ^  
 Great Sir | John, are | all your | own. . . .

And sometimes poets mix iambic tetrameters with catalectic trochaic tetrameters, as A. E. Housman does in “To an Athlete Dying Young”:

The time you won your town the race  
 We chaired you through the market-place;  
 / x / x / x /  
 Man and boy stood cheering by,  
 And home we brought you shoulder-high.

Today, the road all runners come,  
 / x / x / x /  
 Shoulder-high we bring you home,

And set you at your threshold down,  
 /        x   / x   / x   /  
 Townsmen of a stiller town. . . .

Indeed, because the four-beat line is so emphatic, it is possible to mix all of the iambic-trochaic possibilities together and still maintain some sense of metrical coherence. As evidence of this, we can cite Keats's "Give me Women, Wine, and Snuff," a little six-line tour de force consisting of two catalectic trochaic tetrameters, two acatalectic trochaic tetrameters, and two iambic tetrameters:

/    x   / x   / x   /    ^	
Give me women, wine, and snuff	catalectic trochaic tet.
x / x / x        / x /	
Until I cry out, "Hold, enough!"	iambic tet.
/    x   / x   / x   / x	
You may do so sans objection	acatalectic trochaic tet.
/    x   / x   / x   / x	
Till the day of resurrection;	acatalectic trochaic tet.
x    /    x   /        x   /    x   /	
For, bless my beard, they aye will be	iambic tet.
/ x / x        / x / ^	
My beloved Trinity.	catalectic trochaic tet.

A longer trochaic line that English poets (particularly in the nineteenth century) sometimes use is the trochaic octameter. Famous poems in this measure include Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" and Robert Browning's "A Toccata of Galuppi's," in both of which the lines are regularly catalectic.

The best known poem in English in anapestic measure is probably Byron's "Destruction of Sennacherib," which is written in tetrameters. Because it is often cited, I'll use for variety's sake another fine poem in anapestic tetrameter, Jonathan Swift's "Clever Tom Clinch Going to Be Hanged." Here, Swift darkly satirizes the custom of treating executions as public entertainments, describing the passage of a condemned highwayman from Newgate Prison to the gallows at Tyburn. Most of the lines in the poem feature a variation common in anapestic verse: the first metrically unaccented syllable of the line is dropped. Triple meters sometimes ride against the natural grain of English, and it helps to keep the measure in your ear as you read. Otherwise, a line like the sixth, which requires you to treat "Cherry" as having two unaccented syllables, may trip you up.

x    / x x        /        x x   / x x   / (x)	
As clever Tom Clinch, while the Rabble was bawling,	
x    / x x        / x x   / x x   / (x)	
Rode stately through Holborn, to die in his Calling;	

x / x x / x x / x x /  
 He stopt at the George for a Bottle of Sack,  
 x / x x / x x / x x /  
 And promis'd to pay for it when he came back.  
 x / x x / x x / x x /  
 His Waistcoat and Stockings and Breeches were white,  
 x / x x / x x / x x /  
 His Cap had a new Cherry Ribbon to ty't.  
 x / x x / x x / x x /  
 The Maids to the Doors and the Balconies ran,  
 x / x x / x x / x x /  
 And said, lack-a-day! he's a proper young Man.  
 x / x x / x x / x x /  
 But, as from the Windows the Ladies he spy'd,  
 x x / x x / x x / x x /  
 Like a Beau in the Box, he bow'd low on each Side;  
 And when his last Speech the loud Hawkers did cry,  
 He swore from his Cart, it was all a damn'd Lye.  
 The Hangman for Pardon fell down on his Knee;  
 Tom gave him a Kick in the Guts for his Fee.  
 Then said, "I must speak to the People a little,  
 But I'll see you all damn'd before I will whittle.\*  
 My honest Friend Wild,\* may he long hold his Place,  
 He lengthen'd my Life with a whole Year of Grace.  
 Take Courage, dear Comrades, and be not afraid,  
 Nor slip this Occasion to follow your Trade.\*  
 My Conscience is clear, and my Spirits are calm,  
 And thus I go off without Pray'r-Book or Psalm."  
 Then follow the Practice of clever Tom Clinch,  
 Who hung like a Hero, and never would flinch.

\*repent on the gallows

\*Jonathan Wild: a notorious thief and police informant

\*i.e., pick-pocketing

Two other trisyllabic rhythms are the dactylic (heavy-light-light) and the amphibrachic (light-heavy-light). Some prosodists include as well the amphimacer, also called the cretic (heavy-light-heavy). These, however, figure less prominently in English verse than the other rhythms, though in the nineteenth century Robert Southey, Longfellow, and Arthur Hugh Clough experimented with dactylic hexameters. And an adage that my mother taught me as a child, and that has comforted me through many writing projects, seems to be in cretic monometer:

Inch by inch,  
 Life's a cinch.  
 Yard by yard,  
 Life's damn hard.

I discuss these less commonly used meters, as well as experimental verse modes such as syllabics and free verse, in *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*. Readers interested in these modes can consult that book or such works as Derek Attridge's *Rhythms of English Poetry*; Alfred Corn's *The Poem's Heartbeat*; Babette Deutsch's *Poetry Handbook*; John Drury's *Poetry Dictionary*; Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*; Stephen Fry's *Ode Not Taken*; Ronald Greene and Stephen Cushman's *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition; Charles Hartman's *Verse*; John Hollander's *Rhyme's Reason*; Mary Kinzie's *Poet's Guide to Poetry*; James McAuley's *Versification: A Short Introduction*; Robert Pinsky's *The Sounds of Poetry*; George Saintsbury's *Historical Manual of English Prosody*; Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum's *Prosody Handbook*; Lewis Turco's *New Book of Forms*; and Miller Williams's *Patterns of Poetry*.

## IX. Uses and Pleasures of Meter

Well used, meter can make a singular appeal to the ear, mind, and memory. Meter can give language a rare elegance and tension, enabling the poet to unite verbal fluidity with stable form. Working together, the idiosyncratic personal voice and the normative metrical pattern continually transform and are transformed by each other. The metrical pattern gives the personal voice a resistant grace and solidity, while the personal voice infuses the pattern – in itself merely an abstract schema – with vigor and suppleness. Moreover, against ground-bass of meter, shades of accent can be more sensitively registered than is possible in non-metrical media, and the relative weight and speed of words and phrases may be more acutely felt. Also, because meter operates concurrently with grammar, the poet can play the two off of each other in many interesting ways. For example, by making lines end at and coincide with grammatical junctures, the poet can highlight or emphasize meaning. Conversely, by running sentence structure over the end of a line – by setting metrical units at variance with syntactical ones – the poet can extend or shift meaning. So, too, meter can help poets move between different levels of style: meter can give staying power and rhythmical interest to lower-keyed passages, and its steady undercurrent may help to support material that features a greater elevation or dignity of tone.

Metrical composition is, moreover, fun. Craft presents difficulties, but when its challenges are successfully met, the result is a wonderful and cheering reconciliation of rule and freedom, stability and surprise, impersonal form and personal expression.

Lastly, the beauty of fine verse can enable us to face aspects of life that might otherwise defeat our courage. Many of us shrink from acknowledging, much less confronting, the kinds of terrible cruelty and heartbreaking love that Shakespeare explores in *King Lear*. Yet such experiences are part of reality. If we avert our eyes from them, we diminish ourselves and our ability to ameliorate our human condition. Shakespeare's poetry fortifies us. Thanks to his play's memorable lines and dramatic

exchanges – its swift story-telling and skillfully plotted reversals of fortune – we’re better able to look at truth while retaining and enlarging our sympathies for others as we and they move through time. As Janet Lewis puts it, in her tribute, “To the Poet, Clayton Stafford, for His Verse”:

O measured line and sure,  
The fact too hard to face  
We cherish and endure  
Through thine ennobling grace.