# Meter in Greek Tragedy: Iambic Trimeter
## GREEK 228: Attic Drama
Spring 2003 • Wheaton College

According to Aristotle (*Poetics* 4.14 1449a 24-26), **Iambic Trimeter** was the meter that most resembles the natural rhythms of spoken ancient Greek and therefore was the preferred meter for dialogue in drama. A line of iambic trimeter line consists of 3 iambic *metra* (u — u —) and is schematized thus:

x — u — x / — u / — x — u — //
|_____| |_____| |_____| 3 metra

In metrical schema, u indicates a short syllable (*breve*); — a long (*longum*); x is called a *syllaba anceps*, and can be either long or short. / indicates a typical break (caesura).

Any long syllable, including a *syllaba anceps*, may resolve into two shorts. In tragedy, however, *resolution* is most common in the first two *metra* and then in the first iamb of those *metra*.

There is an important qualification to the above schema: the anceps in the 3rd metron is <u>never</u> long if it falls at the end of a word. This is called "Porson's Bridge," after Richard Porson who discovered the phenomenon in 1802 while preparing his edition of Euripides's *Hecuba*.

**Scanning**

A syllable is long by **nature** or by **position**:

1. A syllable is **long by nature** if it is accented with a circumflex or contains: η or ω or a dipthong (even if the dipthong is considered short for purposes of accentuation)

   **N.B.**
   - α, ι, υ are short by nature unless they are marked with a macron in a lexicon
   - ε, ο are short unless they are part of a diphthong
   - rough breathing does not effect scansion

2. A syllable is **long by position** if it contains a short vowel followed by:
   - a double consonant (ζ, ξ, ψ) – N.B. aspirated mutes (θ, φ, χ) are NOT double consonants because 'h' is not considered a consonant.
   - two or more separate consonants. One or both of these consonants may be in the following word, even on the next line.

   **Exception:** a short vowel followed by a combination of a mute and liquid consonant may remain short, or it may become long. mutes = π, β, φ, κ, γ, χ, τ, δ, θ; liquids = λ, μ, ν, ρ

**The first 2 lines of Euripides's *Medea* are scanned as follows:**

Εἴθ᾽ ὤφελ᾽ Ἀργοῦς μὴ διαπτάσθαι σκάφος

Κόλχων ἐς αἶαν κυανέας Συμπληγάδας,