

UNDERSTANDING LATIN METERS



Scanning

The most crucial distinction between Latin and English metrics is that, unlike English meters, which are defined by their patterns of stress and unstressed syllables, Latin meters consist of a regular sequence of long (*longum*) and short (*breve*) syllables.¹ A long syllable (denoted by the symbol —) takes twice as long to pronounce as a short syllable (**U**). The patterns of long and short syllables create the rhythm of the poetry. Knowing whether a vowel is long or short can also prove quite helpful in understanding the poem (for example meter will reveal if a first declension noun (like *porta*) is nominative (*porta*) or ablative singular (*porta*)). The act of determining which syllables are long and short is called “scanning.”

A syllable is long if:

1. its vowel is **long by nature**, *i.e.* contains a long vowel or a diphthong
 - a. long vowels are marked with a macron in a dictionary
 - b. diphthongs = ae, au, ei, eu, oe (sometimes ui)
2. it is **long by position**, *i.e.* its vowel is followed by
 - a. two or more consonants (even if the consonants are in different words):
Huc est mens deducta (Catullus 75.1)
 - b. a so-called double consonant (x = ks; z = sd) *e.g.* *dilexi tum te* (Catullus 72.3)

If a syllable is not long, then it is short.

*** Notable modifications to the above rules:

1. a long syllable can often be subdivided into two shorts. This is called *resolution*. In metrical schema, resolution is marked thus:
2. a mute consonant (p, b, t, d, c, g) followed by a liquid (l, m, n, r) does NOT necessarily "make position" (i.e. make the preceding syllable long by position)
3. a consonant at the end of a word followed by a word beginning with "h" (i.e. initial "h") does not make a syllable long by position
4. remember that "i" is sometimes a consonant (*injuria*, **I**uppiter)
5. su-, qu- and gu- before a vowel are pronounced like one consonant and are considered a consonant when scanning: *e.g.* *sua-vis*, *quin-que* NOT *su-av-is*, *qu-in-qu-e*
6. If a word ends in a vowel, or a vowel + m, AND the next word begins with a vowel or initial "h", the first vowel, and the m/h may not be pronounced or scanned. This is called **elision** and is marked thus: *vento et* and the words would be pronounced *ventet*. Although it may seem odd, a syllable formed by elision is not necessarily long.

There are a few exceptions to this exception:

- If the 2nd word is *est*, the **e** in *est* is elided instead of the final vowel or -m syllable.
- If the -m syllable is long **by nature**, it usually will not be elided. *e.g.*: *tuum est* > *tuumst*
- **Hiatus** is when elision ought to occur, but doesn't.

Examples of elision:

vento et reads and scans as “*ventet*” *dicere hos* = “*diceros*”
BUT: *tuum est* > *tuumst*

Most metrical patterns have natural positions in these schemes where a brief pause occurs. This pause is called a **caesura**. If the end of a metrical foot coincides with an end of a word, the natural pause is called a **dieresis**. Each meter will have different places where these caesurae tend to occur. They are denoted by the symbols “/” or “|”

¹ Most Latin words also have stress accents. It is the interaction of stressed/unstressed syllables with a poem's pattern of longs and shorts that creates the full musicality of Latin verse.

SOME BASIC METRICAL VOCABULARY FOR LATIN POETRY

Raven = D.S. Raven, *Latin Metre: an introduction*, London 1965

Halporn et al. = J.W. Halporn, M. Ostwald & T.G. Rosenmeyer, *The Meters of Greek and Latin Poetry*, rev. ed., Indianapolis/Cambridge/Norman 1980 (and later reprints).

Aeolic meters: the types of lyric meters used by the Greek poets Sappho and Alcaeus (the “Aeolian” poets), and the Athenian dramatists in their choral odes, and imitated by Latin lyric poets (Plautus in his *cantica*, Catullus, Horace, Seneca in his choral lyrics, Statius, and later poets such as Ambrosius, Boethius and Ausonius). Aeolic meters are based on a *choriambic* nucleus (— u u —) with the addition of iambic, trochaic or related (e.g. cretics or bacchiacs) elements at the beginning or end of the line; sometimes another choriamb or two is added. One of the most common Aeolic metrical units is the *glyconic* line (x x — u u — u —). Also see Raven, Ch. 9, pp. 133-150 (§§127-145), and Halporn *et al.* p. 97-102.

carmen, carminis (n.): Latin word for “sung poem,” often used to refer to lyric poems such as Catullus’s poems, or Horace’s *Odes* (as opposed to his *saturae*, *epistulae*, or *epodes* —on the last category, see below).

caesura: the regular pause or “cutting” of a metrical foot, particularly near the midpoint of a poetic line; denoted by a |; it is more strongly felt when reinforced by a word grouping and/or punctuation.

diaeresis: a slight pause in mid-line where the end of a word matches the end of a metrical foot; functions in the same manner as a caesura; denoted by a ||

elision: the suppression of a final vowel or vowel + m before an initial vowel or h- in the following word.

element: The space occupied by a longum, breve, or by an anceps in conformity with the basic structure

epode: Greek word meaning literally “added song” or “additional song”; originally a term for the stanza with no responding stanza sometimes added at the end of a choral *stasimon* in Greek drama. In describing some of the poems of the Greek poet Archilochus, and in Latin lyric, it refers to poetry composed in units of two lines, each with a different meter (or at least a different number of feet, *metra*, of the same general rhythm), and (usually) with the first line longer than the second.

lyric : literally “(sung to) the lyre”; this adjective refers generally to poetry that mixes various kinds of rhythmical units, not just repeating the same kind of rhythm over and over, in order to form a larger, rhythmically varied stanza. The meters used by Roman poets who wrote “lyrics” in Latin were based on meters used by Greek poets, whose poems were in fact usually sung to the lyre or another stringed instrument, hence the name.

meter: The rhythmical pattern in which a period of poetry is composed.

metron: “measure”. The smallest metrical unit, consisting of a given sequence and number of long and short elements, of a period made up of several such units.

ode: Greek word meaning literally “song”; originally a term for a single choral lyric poem with no responding stanza (*antistrophe*). In Latin lyric it refers to a lyric stanza, or to a series of stanzas that form one poem. Horace’s *Odes*, or *Carmina*, are almost all in the form of groups of stanzas of four lines each.

responsion: The parallelism of metric schemes between strophe and strophe or strophe and antistrophe.

stichic: literally “by line”; this adjective refers to poetry in the form of repetition of a single rhythmic line, rather than the mixture of different lines within a stanza to form a rhythmically varied unit. It is sometimes (not always) used to contrast a style of poetry with lyric’s stanza format. (But of course lyric poetry can include some repeated lines in a particular metrical scheme as well, so the contrast is not complete.)