

A Sample Scansion – Catullus 1.1

LATIN 226: Roman Lyric

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All meters have a basic form, consisting of a sequence of long and short syllables, to which a poet must adhere. In certain extremely rare instances, a competent poet may break from the scheme for particular effect.

Let's take a look at the first poem in the Catullan corpus: Catullus 1 (*cui dono lepidum*)

The commentary reveals that this poem is composed in the hendecasyllabic meter, the metrical scheme for which is represented thus:

X X u u u u X

In schematic representations of meter, an X denotes a *syllable anceps*, a syllable that can be either long or short; denotes a long syllable (*longum*); u denotes a short syllable (*breve*).

If we were to articulate the above pattern, we would say:

anceps anceps long short short long short long short long anceps

Now let's examine the first line of Catullus 1: *cui dono lepidum nouum libellum*

The first step in scanning is to be able to differentiate the syllables of a line: simply put, a syllable begins with a consonant or vowel and stops at its opposite, if it begins with a consonant, it ends with a vowel and vice versa; the only exception is if the syllable is followed by two or more consonants (even if the second consonant is in the next word), in which case, the first consonant will be included in the preceding syllable and the second consonant will start the following syllable. This is called a “closed syllable” and this syllable will be long by nature.

Catullus 1.1 yields the following syllables: *cui-do-no-le-pi-dum-no-vum-li-bel-lum*

1. **cui**: according to the metrical scheme, can be either long or short: since it is not long by nature (check a dictionary) or long by position (check the rules); it must be **short**.
2. **do**: can be either long or short: it is not long by position but it is **long** by nature.
3. **no**: should be long: is **long** by nature.
4. **le**: should be short: it is not long by nature or long by position; it must be **short**.
5. **pi**: should be short: it is not long by nature or long by position; it must be **short**.
6. **dum**: should be long; since **dum** ends in a –m so we should be on the lookout for elision but, since the next word begins with a consonant, there is no elision but it does cause **dum** to be a “closed syllable.” Since the vowel is followed by 2 consonants, it is **long** by nature (*mn*).
7. **no**: should be short: it is not long by nature or long by position; it must be **short**.
8. **vum**: same as in #6 (*ml*).
9. **li**: should be short: it is not long by nature or long by position; it must be **short**.
10. **bel**: should be long; **long** by position (*ll*).
11. **lum**: can be either long or short; the next word begins with a vowel, so it is not long by nature; it must be **short**.

On a scanning worksheet, we would represent this information thus:

cui dono lepidum nouum libellum

Now you are ready to try scanning on your own... BONAM FORTUNAM