

whether writing the poetry of love or of intense religious experience, he was above all "witty," making ingenious use of *paradox*, *pun*, and startling parallels in simile and metaphor (see *metaphysical conceit* and *wit*). The beginnings of four of Donne's poems will illustrate the shock tactic, the dramatic form of direct address, the rough idiom, and the rhythms of the living voice that are characteristic of his metaphysical style:

Go and catch a falling star,
 Get with child a mandrake root . . .
 For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love.
 Busy old fool, unruly sun . . .
 Batter my heart, three-personed God . . .

Some, not all, of Donne's poetic procedures have parallels in each of his contemporaries and successors whom literary historians usually group as metaphysical poets.

These poets have had admirers in every age, but beginning with the *Neo-classic Period* of the later seventeenth century, they were by most critics and readers regarded as interesting but perversely ingenious and obscure exponents of *false wit*, until a drastic reevaluation after World War I elevated Donne, and to a lesser extent Herbert and Marvell, high in the hierarchy of English poets (see *canon of literature*). This reversal owed much to H. J. C. Grierson's Introduction to *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (1912), was given strong impetus by T. S. Eliot's essays "The Metaphysical Poets" and "Andrew Marvell" (1921), and was continued by a great number of commentators, including F. R. Leavis in England and especially the American New Critics, who tended to elevate the metaphysical style into the model of their ideal poetry of irony, paradox, and "unified sensibility." (See *dissociation of sensibility*.) More recently, Donne has lost his exemplary status, but continues to occupy a firm position as a prominent poet in the English canon.

See George Williamson, *The Donne Tradition* (1930); F. R. Leavis, *Reevaluation* (1936); Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939); Rosemund Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (1947); J. E. Duncan, *The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry* (1959); Helen Gardner, ed., *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962). F. J. Warnke, *European Metaphysical Poetry* (1961), treats the continental vogue of this style.

Meter is the recurrence, in regular units, of a prominent feature in the sequence of speech-sounds of a language. There are four main types of meter in European languages: (1) In classical Greek and Latin, the meter was **quantitative**; that is, it was established by the relative duration of the utterance of a syllable, and consisted of a recurrent pattern of long and short syllables. (2) In French and many other Romance languages, the meter is **syllabic**, depending on the number of syllables within a line of verse, without regard to the fall of the stresses. (3) In the older Germanic languages, including Old English, the meter is **accentual**, depending on the number of stressed syllables within a line, without regard to the number of intervening unstressed syllables. (4) The

fourth type of meter, combining the features of the two preceding types, is **accentual-syllabic**, in which the metric units consist of a recurrent pattern of stresses on a recurrent number of syllables. The stress-and-syllable type has been the predominant meter of English poetry since the fourteenth century.

There is considerable dispute about the most valid way to analyze and classify English meters. This entry will begin by presenting a traditional accentual-syllabic analysis which has the virtues of being simple, widely used, and applicable to by far the greater part of English poetry from Chaucer to the present. Major departures from this stress-and-syllable meter will be described in the latter part of the entry.

In all sustained spoken English we sense a **rhythm**; that is, a recognizable though varying pattern in the beat of the **stresses**, or **accents** (the more forcefully uttered, hence louder syllables), in the stream of speech-sounds. In meter, this rhythm is structured into a recurrence of regular—that is, approximately equivalent—units of stress-pattern. Compositions written in meter are also known as **verse**.

We attend, in reading verse, to the individual **line**, which is a sequence of words printed as a separate entity on the page. The meter is determined by the pattern of stronger and weaker stresses on the syllables composing the words in the verse-line; the stronger is called the “stressed” syllable and all the weaker ones the “unstressed” syllables. (What the ear perceives as a strong stress is not an absolute quantity, but is relative to the degree of stress in the adjacent syllables.) Three major factors determine where the stresses (in the sense of the relatively stronger stresses or accents) will fall in a line of verse: (1) Most important is the “word accent” in words of more than one syllable; in the noun “áccent” itself, for example, the stress falls on the first syllable. (2) There are also many monosyllabic words in the language, and on which of these—in a sentence or a phrase—the stress will fall depends on the grammatical function of the word (we normally put stronger stress on nouns, verbs, and adjectives, for example, than on articles or prepositions), and depends also on the “rhetorical accent,” or the emphasis we give a word because we want to enhance its importance in a particular utterance. (3) Another determinant of perceived stress is the prevailing “metrical accent,” which is the beat that we have come to expect, in accordance with the stress pattern that was established earlier in the metrical composition.

If the prevailing stress pattern enforces a drastic alteration of the normal word accent, we get a **wrenched accent**. Wrenching may be the result of a lack of metrical skill; it was, however, conventional in the *folk ballad* (for example, “fair ladie,” “far countrée”), and is sometimes deliberately used for comic effects, as in Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819–24) and in the verses of Ogden Nash.

It is possible to distinguish a number of degrees of syllabic stress in English speech, but the most common and generally useful fashion of analyzing and classifying the standard English meters is “binary.” That is, we distinguish only two categories—strong stress and weak stress—and group the syllables into metric feet according to the patterning of these two degrees. A foot is the

combination of a strong stress and the associated weak stress or stresses which make up the recurrent metric unit of a line. The relatively stronger-stressed syllable is called, for short, “stressed”; the relatively weaker-stressed syllables are called “light,” or most commonly, “unstressed.”

The four standard feet distinguished in English are:

- (1) **Iambic** (the noun is “iamb”): an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

Thě cúr | fěw tólls | thě knéll | óf pár | tǐng dáy. |

(Thomas Gray,

“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”)

- (2) **Anapestic** (the noun is “anapest”): two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable.

Thě Ās sýr | iǎn cǎme dówn | líke ǎ wólf | ón thě fóld. |

(Lord Byron,

“The Destruction of Sennacherib”)

- (3) **Trochaic** (the noun is “trochee”): a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable.

Thére thěy | áre, mý | fíf tý | mén ǎnd | wó měn. |

(Robert Browning, “One Word More”)

Most trochaic lines lack the final unstressed syllable—in the technical term, such lines are **catalectic**. So in Blake’s “The Tiger”:

Tí gěr! | tí gěr! | búrn ñng | bríght |

Ín thě | fó rěst | óf thě | níght. |

- (4) **Dactylic** (the noun is “dactyl”): a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.

Éve, wíth hěr | bás kět, wǎs |

Déep ñn thě | bélls ǎnd grǎss. |

(Ralph Hodgson, “Eve”)

Iambs and anapests, since the strong stress is at the end, are called “rising meter”; trochees and dactyls, with the strong stress at the beginning, are called “falling meter.” Iambs and trochees, having two syllables, are called “duple meter”; anapests and dactyls, having three syllables, are called “triple meter.” It should be noted that the iamb is by far the commonest English foot.

Two other feet are often distinguished by special titles, although they occur in English meter only as variants from standard feet:

Spondaic (the noun is “spondee”): two successive syllables with approximately equal strong stresses, as in each of the first two feet of this line:

Góod stróng! thíck stúlpě fýl ñng ínłcěnsé smóke. |

(Browning, “The Bishop Orders His Tomb”)

Pyrrhic (the noun is also “pyrrhic”): a foot composed of two successive syllables with approximately equal light stresses, as in the second and fourth feet in this line:

Mý wǎy | is tǒ | bǝ gín | wíth thǝ | bǝ gín nǝngl
(Byron, *Don Juan*)

This latter term is used only infrequently. Some traditional metrists deny the existence of a true pyrrhic, on the grounds that the prevailing metrical accent—in the above instance, iambic—always imposes a slightly stronger stress on one of the two syllables.

A metric line is named according to the number of feet composing it:

monometer: one foot

dimeter: two feet

trimeter: three feet

tetrameter: four feet

pentameter: five feet

hexameter: six feet (an **Alexandrine** is a line of six iambic feet)

heptameter: seven feet (a **fourteener** is another term for a line of seven iambic feet—hence, of fourteen syllables; it tends to break into a unit of four feet followed by a unit of three feet)

octameter: eight feet

To describe the meter of a line we name (a) the predominant foot and (b) the number of feet it contains. In the illustrations above, for example, the line from Gray’s “Elegy” is “iambic pentameter,” and the line from Byron’s “The Destruction of Sennacherib” is “anapestic tetrameter.”

To **scan** a passage of verse is to go through it line by line, analyzing the component feet, and also indicating where any major pauses in the phrasing fall within a line. Here is a **scansion**, signified by conventional symbols, of the first five lines from John Keats’ *Endymion* (1818). The passage was chosen because it exemplifies a flexible and variable rather than a highly regular metrical pattern.

(1) Ǻ thǝng | ǒf béau | tǝ ís | Ǻ jóy | fǒr é vǝr: |

(2) Íts lǒve | lí nǝss | ín créas | ǝs; // ít | wíll név ǝr |

(3) Pǎss ín | tǒ nóth | íng nǝss, | // bútt stíll | wíll kǝép |

(4) Ǻ bów | ǝr quí | ǝt fǒr | ús, // ánd | Ǻ slǝép |

(5) Fúll ǒf | swǝét dréams, | Ǻnd héalth, | Ǻnd quí | ǝt bréath íng. |

The prevailing meter is iambic pentameter. As in all fluent verse, however, there are many variations upon the basic iambic foot; these are sometimes called “substitutions.” Thus:

(1) The closing feet of lines 1, 2, and 5 end with an extra unstressed syllable, and are said to have a **feminine ending**. In lines 3 and 4, the closing feet, because they are standard iambs, end with a stressed syllable and are said to have **masculine endings**.

- (2) In lines 3 and 5, the opening iambic feet have been “inverted” to form trochees. (The initial position is the most common place for inversions in iambic verse.)
- (3) I have marked the second foot in line 2, and the third foot of line 3 and line 4, as pyrrhics (two unstressed syllables); these help to give Keats’ verses their rapid movement. This is a procedure in scansion about which metric analysts disagree: some will feel enough of a metric beat to mark all these feet as iambs; others will mark still other feet (for example, the third foot of line 1) as pyrrhics also. And some metrists prefer to use symbols measuring two degrees of strong stress, and will indicate a difference in the feet, as follows:

ĭts lÓve | ĩ nĕss | ĩn crĕas | ěs.

Notice, however, that these are differences only in nuance; analysts agree that the prevailing pulse of Keats’ versification is iambic throughout, and that despite many variations, the felt norm is of five stresses in the verse-line.

Two other elements are important in the metric movement of Keats’ passage: (1) In lines 1 and 5, the pause in the reading—which occurs naturally at the end of a sentence, clause, or other syntactic unit—coincides with the end of the line; such lines are called **end-stopped**. Lines 2 through 4, on the other hand, are called **run-on lines** (or in a term derived from the French, they exhibit **enjambment**—“a striding-over”), because the pressure of the incomplete syntactic unit toward closure carries on over the end of the verse-line. (2) When a strong phrasal pause falls within a line, as in lines 2, 3, and 4, it is called a **caesura**—indicated in the quoted passage by the conventional symbol //. The management of these internal pauses is important for giving variety and for providing expressive emphases in the long pentameter line.

To understand the use and limitations of an analysis such as this, we must realize that a prevailing metric pattern (iambic pentameter, in the passage from Keats) establishes itself as a perceived norm which controls the reader’s expectations, even though the number of lines that deviate from the norm may exceed the number that fit the norm exactly. In addition, scansion is an abstract scheme which deliberately omits notation of many aspects of the actual reading of a poem that contribute importantly to its pace, rhythm, and total impression. It does not specify, for example, whether the component words in a metric line are short words or long words, or whether the strong stresses fall on short vowels or long vowels; it does not give any indication of the *intonation*—the overall rise and fall in the pitch and loudness of the voice—which we use to bring out the meaning and rhetorical effect of these poetic lines; nor does it indicate the interplay of the metric stresses with the rhythms of the varied phrasal and clausal structures within a sustained poetic passage. Such details are omitted in order to lay bare the essential metric skeleton; that is, the pattern of the stronger and weaker stresses in the syllabic sequence of a verse-line. Moreover, an actual reading of a poem, if it is a skillful reading, will not accord mechanically with the scansion. There is a difference between the scansion, as

an abstract metrical norm, and a skilled and expressive oral reading, or **performance**, of a poem; and no two competent readers will perform the same lines in precisely the same way. But in a performance, the metric norm indicated by the scansion is sensed as an implicit understructure of pulses; in fact, the interplay of an expressive performance, sometimes with and sometimes against this underlying structural pattern, gives tension and vitality to our experience of verse.

We need to note, finally, that some kinds of versification which occur in English poetry differ from the syllable-and-stress type already described:

- (1) **Strong-stress meters or accentual verse.** In this meter, native to English and other Germanic languages, only the beat of the strong stresses counts in the scanning, while the number of intervening light syllables is highly variable. Usually there are four strong-stressed syllables in a line, whose beat is emphasized by *alliteration*. This was the meter of Old English poetry and continued to be the meter of many Middle English poems, until Chaucer and others popularized the syllable-and-stress meter. In the opening passage, for example, of *Piers Plowman* (later fourteenth century) the four strong stresses (always divided by a medial caesura) are for the most part reinforced by alliteration (see *alliterative meter*); the light syllables, which vary in number, are recessive and do not assert their individual presence:

In a sómer sésón, // whan sóft was the sónne,
 I shópe me in shróudes, // as Í a shépe were,
 In hábits like an héremite, // unhóly of wórkes,
 Went wýde in this wórld, // wónders to hére.

Strong-stress meter survives in *folk* poetry and in traditional children's rhymes such as "Hickory, dickory, dock" and was revived as an artful literary meter by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *Christabel* (1816), in which each line has four strong stresses but the number of syllables within a line varies from four to twelve.

What G. M. Hopkins in the later nineteenth century called his **sprung rhythm** is a variant of strong-stress meter: each foot, as he describes it, begins with a stressed syllable, which may either stand alone or be associated with from one to three (occasionally even more) light syllables. Two six-stress lines from Hopkins' "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*" indicate the variety of the rhythms in this meter, and also exemplify its most striking feature: the great weight of the strong stresses, and the frequent juxtaposition of strong stresses (*spondees*) at any point in the line. The stresses in the second line were marked in a manuscript by Hopkins himself; they indicate that in complex instances, his metric decisions may seem arbitrary:

The | sóur | scýthe | crínge, and the | bléar | sháre | cóme. |
 Our | héarts' chárity's | héarth's | fire, our | thóughts' chivalry's |
 thróng's | Lórd. |

(See Marcella M. Holloway, *The Prosodic Theory of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 1947.) A number of modern metrists, including T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, skillfully interweave both strong-stress and syllable-and-stress meters in some of their versification.

- (2) *Quantitative meters* in English are written in imitation of classical Greek and Latin versification, in which the metrical pattern is not determined by the stress but by the "quantity" (duration of pronunciation) of a syllable, and the foot consists of a combination of "long" and "short" syllables. Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Thomas Campion, and other Elizabethan poets experimented with this meter in English, as did Coleridge, Tennyson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Robert Bridges later on. The strong accentual character of English, however, as well as the indeterminateness of the duration of a syllable in the English language, makes it impossible to sustain a quantitative meter for any length. See Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighted Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Meters* (1974).
- (3) In *free verse* (discussed in a separate entry), the component lines have no (or only occasional) metric feet, or uniform stress-patterns.

George Saintsbury, *Historical Manual of English Prosody* (1910), and R. M. Alden, *English Verse* (1930), are well-illustrated treatments of traditional syllable-and-stress metrics. For later discussions of this and alternative metric theories see George R. Stewart, *The Technique of English Verse* (1930); Seymour Chatman, *A Theory of Meter* (1965); and W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Concept of Meter" (1959). This last essay is reprinted in W. K. Wimsatt, *Hateful Contraries* (1965), and in Harvey Gross, ed., *The Structure of Verse* (1966)—an anthology that reprints other useful essays, including Northrop Frye, "The Rhythm of Recurrence," and Yvor Winters, "The Audible Reading of Poetry." See also W. K. Wimsatt, ed., *Versification: Major Language Types* (1972); Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (rev., 1979); John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse* (1981); Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (1983); T. V. F. Brogan, *English Versification, 1570–1980* (1981).

Miracle Plays, Morality Plays, and Interludes are types of late-medieval drama, written in a variety of verse forms.

The **miracle play** had as its subject either a story from the Bible, or else the life and martyrdom of a saint. In the usage of some historians, however, "Miracle play" denotes only dramas based on saints' lives, and the term **mystery play**—"mystery" in the archaic sense of the "trade" conducted by each of the medieval guilds who sponsored these plays—is applied only to dramas based on the Bible.

The plays representing biblical narratives originated within the church in about the tenth century, in dramatizations of brief parts of the Latin liturgical service, called **tropes**, especially the "Quem quaeritis" ("Whom are you seeking") trope portraying the visit of the three Marys to the tomb of Christ. Gradually these evolved into complete plays which were written in English instead