
APPENDIX A

The Meter of the AENEID and Companion Texts

VERGIL'S METER: THE DACTYLIC HEXAMETER

Vergil used dactylic hexameter, the meter of epic poetry, to compose the *Aeneid*. Homer (eighth century BCE) established the epic character of dactylic hexameter by using it to compose the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; many other early Greek epic poems, now lost, were composed in the same meter. Beginning in the third century BCE, Latin poets began to experiment with adapting dactylic hexameter to their language. This was no easy task—Greek has a much larger vocabulary, including many more words with multiple short syllables, than does Latin, and is therefore better suited than Latin to dactylic hexameter. Vergil is generally considered by scholars and other admirers to have been the first to bring dactylic hexameter to perfection in Latin; in fact, many believe that he was the first *and* last Latin poet to do so. Whether this is true or not, there is no better introduction to Latin meter than through Vergil; and, strained and odd-sounding though the results may be at first, it is in fact possible with practice to get a reasonable idea of how Latin poetry might have sounded two thousand years ago. It is important to make this attempt both for its own sake and because much ancient poetry, including the *Aeneid*, was intended to be heard; and a well-read excerpt can be quite powerful.

The term **dactylic hexameter** is derived from Greek. **Hexameter** means “six measures” (**hex**, “six”; **metron**, “measure”). A **dactyl** is a measure consisting of one long and two short syllables; the name **dactyl** comes from the Greek word for “finger” (**daktylos**), since with its two joints a finger can be imagined as consisting of one longer and two shorter sections. A line of dactylic hexameter consists of five dactylic measures (or, as they are commonly called, “feet”) followed by a final measure of two syllables, the first of which is always long. Any of the five dactyls can be replaced by a **spondee** (a measure consisting of two long syllables). The pattern of long and short syllables in dactylic hexameter looks like this (*Aen.* 1.1–11):

— ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — — | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
ARMA virumque canō, Troiae quī prīmus ab ōrīs

— ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
Ītaliā fātō profugus Lāvīniaque vēnit

— ◡ ◡ | — — | — — | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
lītora, multum ille et terrīs iactātus et altō

— ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
vī superum, saevae memorem Iūnōnis ob īram,

5 — ◡ ◡ | — — | — — | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
multa quoque et bellō passus, dum conderet urbem

— — | — ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
īferretque deōs Latīō; genus unde Latīnum

— — | — ◡ ◡ | — — | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
Albānīque patrēs atque altae moenia Rōmae.

— ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
Mūsa, mihī causās memorā, quō nūmine laesō

— ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
quidve dolēns rēgina deum tot volvere cāsūs

10 — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
īnsignem pietāte virum, tot adīre labōrēs

— ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — ×
impulerit. Tantaene animīs caelestibus irāe?

Note that the final syllable in a line is always indicated by ×. It can be either long or short; its Latin name, **syllaba anceps**, means “ambiguous” or “undecided syllable.”

Most lines of hexameter consist of a combination of dactyls and spondees. The variety of combinations available would have kept the spoken verse from sounding monotonous. Note, however, that lines consisting entirely of spondees are very rare, and that Vergil uses a spondee in the fifth foot only on rare occasions. Such lines (i.e., those with a fifth-foot spondee) are called “spondaic lines,” or **spondeiazontes** (singular, **spondeiazon**). Lines consisting entirely of dactyls are relatively unusual as well, although they are not as rare as spondaic lines.

Latin meter is **quantitative**. Every syllable in a Latin word has a quantity, either “long” or “short.” Syllable length is determined a) by nature or b) by position. See items 14–24 in the online Grammatical Appendix located on the publisher’s website (www.bolchazy.com) for general guidelines on how to determine the length of a syllable.

Some special features of the Latin hexameter should be noted:

Elision – when one word ends with a vowel, diphthong, or -m, and the following word begins with a vowel or h-, the first vowel or diphthong is elided, i.e., blended, with the second. The length of the resulting combination syllable will generally be whatever the length of the second syllable originally was. There are examples of elision above in lines 3, 5, 7, and 11.

Hiatus – see the list of rhetorical and stylistic devices below.

Consonantal vowels – when used in combination with other vowels (e.g., *Iuppiter, coniunx, genua*), the vowels **i** and **u** can sometimes serve as consonants, pronounced as **j** and **w**, respectively. As such, they do not create diphthongs with the vowels next to them, and they can lengthen a preceding short syllable if combined with another consonant. There is an example above in line 2, *Laviniaque*, where the second -i- is treated as a consonant.

Synizesis – see the list of rhetorical and stylistic devices below.

Hypermetric lines – occasionally a hexameter ends with a syllable that can elide with the first syllable of the next line. This final syllable is not needed to complete the metrical pattern of the line in which it appears.

METERS OF THE COMPANION TEXTS

Elegiac Couplets

Elegiac couplets consist of one verse of **dactylic hexameter** followed by a verse of **dactylic pentameter catalectic**. This meter is the dominant vehicle for love poetry among the Greeks and Romans.

– ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ | ×
 – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ | – | – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ | –

NB: In the hexameter line, dactyls [– ∪ ∪] can normally be replaced with spondees [– –] in every foot except the fifth; when that rule is broken, the line is called a **spondaic hexameter**. In the pentameter

line, the third and sixth feet are “broken” (**catalectic** means “cut off”), ending after the first syllable, so the pentameter is actually a line of 2.5 + 2.5 dactyls.

Hendecasyllables

This is a meter consisting of eleven syllables (**hendeca-** means “eleven” in Greek). The center of each verse is a **choriamb**, a unit consisting of four syllables in the pattern *long-short-short-long*. Both before and after the central choriamb, the line exhibits **choriambic expansion**—that is, it is both preceded and followed by other syllables in the same pattern in every verse. Each verse scans as follows:

— — — ∪ — ∪ — ∪ — ∪ — ×

Fourth Asclepiadean

This meter is a good example of **choriambic expansion**. The core of the line is the choriamb, a unit consisting of four syllables in the pattern *long-short-short-long*. The first two lines have two choriambes at the center, while the second two are shorter forms, with only one. In each line, the choriambes are preceded by two syllables that can be *either long or short*. The first and second lines conclude with two syllables that are *always short-long* (equivalent to the second half of a choriamb). In the third line (called a **Pherecratean**), the choriamb is followed by a *single long* syllable, while in the fourth line (**Glyconic**), the choriamb is followed by a *short-long* combination.

× × — ∪ — — ∪ — ∪ — —

× × — ∪ — — ∪ — ∪ — —

× × — ∪ — —

× × — ∪ — ∪ —

Fifth Asclepiadean

This meter is another example of **choriambic expansion**, but with fewer variations since every verse has the same pattern. Notice the three choriambes at the center of each line. They are preceded by two syllables that can be *either long or short* and are followed by two syllables that are always in the pattern *short-long* (equivalent to the second half of a choriamb).

× × — ∪ — — ∪ — — ∪ — — ∪ — —

Alcaic

This is another lyric metrical pattern featuring the **choriamb**, but with a greater range of variations. The first two lines in each stanza each consist of eleven syllables, with a choriamb at the center; the third line is purely iambic (i.e., it does not contain a choriamb); and the fourth consists of ten syllables, with one choriamb at the center.

x – u – x – u – u – u –
 x – u – x – u – u – u –
 x – u – x – u – x
 – u – u – u – u – –