

# Principles of Literary Study

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January 30, 2023. Meter (I): four beats.

## review

- ▶ poems spread sentences over lines
- ▶ the breaks are interesting
  - ▶ especially when they don't align with grammatical breaks (enjambment)
  - ▶ or even if they do
- ▶ when you read a poem, mark the sentence divisions
  - ▶ consider: what you expect vs. what you get
  - ▶ “and not to think...”
  - ▶ “...of any misery”

## stress test

- ▶ in any word on its own, one syllable has primary **lexical stress**
  - ▶ marked by pitch, duration, amplitude in neutral pronunciation
- ▶ examples to try: sat, horses, together, wagon, blue, amazing, mortal, eldern, yestreen, delight, symmetry, funeral, down, gathering, uncertain, assignable, interposed, brillig, Jabberwock, outgrave
  - ▶ try saying/listening first
  - ▶ or use the dictionary (OED, [Wiktionary](#) or, whatever, google)

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- ▶ examples to try: sát, hórses, togéther, wágon, blúe, amázing, mórtal, éldern, yestréen, delíght, sýmmetry, fúneral, dówn, gáthering, uncértain, assígnable, interpósed, bríllig, Jábberwock, outgrábe
  - ▶ try saying/listening first
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## extra stress

- ▶ polysyllabic words can have secondary (or tertiary) stresses too
  - ▶ <sup>2</sup>inter<sup>1</sup>posed
  - ▶ primary vs. secondary rarely important for meter
- ▶ in phrases, more nuances:
  - ▶ monosyllabic function words (the, in, it...) lose their stress
  - ▶ verb + prep. has stress on the latter (watch **out**)
  - ▶ earlier words' stress is reduced in relation to later words':
    - the president of the united federation of planets
  - ▶ retraction: **thirteen** vs. **thirteen** **candles**
- ▶ regularities (1000% optional): covered in **INTRA**, §3

## phrase stress practice

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)

# phrase stress practice

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)

S W S W S W W S

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall

W S W S W S W S

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)

# meter in the abstract

- ▶ meter is a **relation** between:
  1. the syllables and stresses of the line
  2. an abstract, regular rhythmic pattern
- ▶ the relation is **two-way**:
  - ▶ the language creates the pattern
  - ▶ the pattern creates expectations for the language
  - ▶ expectations can be fulfilled in multiple ways
  - ▶ expectations can be violated



## four beats

s w s w s w w s

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall

B B B B

s w s w s w w s

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall

B B B B

s w w s w w s w w s

All the king's horses and all the king's men

B B B B

s w w s w w s w w s

Couldn't put Humpty together again

B B B B

## practice: stresses and beats

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear

Kept treading - treading - till it seemed

And hit a World, at every plunge

The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame

W S W S W S W S  
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,

B B B B

W S W S W W W S  
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed

B B B B

W S W S W S W S  
And hit a World, at every plunge

B B B B

W S W S W S W S  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame

B B B B

# meter rules of thumb

## I. Beats normally land on a stressed syllable

s w        s w s w        s  
Up and spak an eldern knicht,  
B            B        B            B

# promotion

1. Beats normally land on a stressed syllable, but
2. Beats can land on an unstressed syllable if its neighbors are also unstressed

|     |      |     |           |    |     |     |   |
|-----|------|-----|-----------|----|-----|-----|---|
| W   | S    | W   | S         | W  | W   | W   | S |
| Was | like | the | Stillness | in | the | Air | - |
|     | B    |     | B         |    | B   |     | B |
|     |      |     |           |    | -   |     |   |

## virtual beats

1. Beats normally land on a stressed syllable, but
2. Beats can land on an unstressed syllable if its neighbors are also unstressed, and
3. A beat at the end of a line can be realized by a pause (musical rest) instead of a syllable, if the expectation is strong enough

|     |        |     |       |     |      |    |        |   |     |
|-----|--------|-----|-------|-----|------|----|--------|---|-----|
| w   | s      |     | w     | s   |      | w  | s      | w | s   |
| I   | once   | was | lost, | but | now  | am | found, |   |     |
|     | B      |     | B     |     | B    |    | B      |   |     |
| w   | s      |     | w     | s   | w    | s  |        |   |     |
| Was | blind, | but | now   | I   | see. |    |        |   |     |
|     | B      |     | B     |     | B    |    |        |   | [B] |

## demotion

1. Beats normally land on a stressed syllable, but
2. Beats can land on an unstressed syllable if its neighbors are also unstressed, and even
3. A beat at the end of a line can be realized by a pause (musical rest) instead of a syllable, if the expectation is strong enough
4. Stressed syllables can be offbeats between stresses, or between a linebreak and a stress

W S S S W S  
Our guid schip sails the morne:

o B o B B [B]

# offbeat rules

## I. Offbeats are normally one or two syllables

w        s   w   s            w   s   w   s  
And then I heard them lift a Box  
o        B o B            o   B   o   B



offbeats: more next time

W        W   S        S        W   S  
and the mome raths outgrabe  
o        B o B        o        B        [B]

W   S        S        W        W   S   W        S  
The boy stood on the burning deck  
o B o B        o        B o        B

W   S        W   S        W   S   W        S  
The boy stood ON the burning deck  
o B        o B        o B o        B

## practice on a stanza

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears reliev'd;  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believ'd!

W S W S W S W S  
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
B B B B

W S W S W S  
And grace my fears reliev'd;  
B B B [B]

W S W W S W S  
How precious did that grace appear,  
B B B B  
-

W S W S W S  
The hour I first believ'd!  
B B B [B]

## summary: common meter

- ▶ 4x4 beats
- ▶ ABAB or ABCB rhyme
- ▶ usually B lines have virtual last beat
  - ▶ so it looks like 4343
- ▶ some variants have rules for offbeats: next time
- ▶ used in:
  - ▶ hymns like “Amazing Grace”
  - ▶ ballads like “Sir Patrick Spens” or “Boots of Spanish Leather”
  - ▶ lots of songs from Early Modern period to now

also used in...

“How many are you then,” said I,

“If they two are in Heaven?”

The little maiden did reply,

“O Master! we are seven.”

also used in...

“How many are you then,” said I,  
“If they two are in Heaven?”  
The little maiden did reply,  
“O Master! we are seven.”

I watch the man as he stands and pours  
in the familiar shape  
bright purple in the one marked ORANGE  
orange in the one marked GRAPE,  
the grape drink in the machine marked ORANGE  
and orange drink in the GRAPE.  
Just the one word large and clear, unmistakable, on each machine.

## memorable...or forgettable

It is exactly this “ti-dum ti-dum” factor [the meter of “Casabianca”] that we need to examine, that we need to reunderstand in relation to history. And the historical context we must consider is not the moment that Felicia Hemans sat down to write a poem but the subsequent experience of her work in the mouths and bodies of tens of thousands of children...

“Casabianca” has been remembered as a poem with uniform meter because of the circumstances of its assimilation into a culture.

Robson, “Standing on the Burning Deck,” 158–59.

next

- ▶ count to five (pentameter)
- ▶ read very carefully from INTRA:
  - ▶ 4.1 Meter
  - ▶ 4.3 Attridge's Beat-Offbeat Method:
    - ▶ 4.3.1 The Base Rules
    - ▶ 4.3.2 Promotion Rule
    - ▶ 4.3.3 Demotion Rule
    - ▶ 4.3.4 Implied Offbeat Rule
    - ▶ 4.3.5 Complexity and Tension
  - ▶ INTRA exercises are optional
- ▶ focus on:
  - ▶ Barbauld, "Washing-Day"
  - ▶ Shelley, "England in 1819"