Principles of Literary Study
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Office hours: normally Thursdays 11:45–12:45 in MU 040A
This week: Friday on Zoom 10:00–11:00

February 5, 2026. Meter (2): pentameter.

review: meter generally

- meter is a relationship between:
  1. stressed and unstressed syllables of the line
  2. abstract rhythmic pattern of beats
- relationship status: it's complicated

review: analysis procedure ("scansion")

1. mark the stresses in the line (`s` and `w`)
   - one-syllable function words usually `w`
   - otherwise, lexical stress (primary or secondary)
   - (some complications in phrases)
   - you *can* use the dictionary, but try your ear
2. locate the beats and offbeats (`B` and `o`)

what's the point?

- "rules" aren't laws; they *describe practice*
  - compare: grammar, harmony
- analyze the meter, then consider the *significance* of:
  - the pattern itself (conventions, norms)
  - deviations (emphases, surprises)

iambic pentameter: the dominant English meter

- `(o)BoBoBoBoB(o)`
  - `oBoBoBoBoB` most typically
- five beats (*penta-:* five; *metron:* measure)
- alternating: normally one-syllable offbeat between beats
  - so: ten syllables (or eleven)
- rising: often grouped as `oB oB oB oB oB`
  - "iambic" (falling would be "trochaic")
- unlike four-beat, no natural halfway split ($5 = 2 + 3 = 3 + 2$)

iambic pentameter rules of thumb: base rules

1. Beats (B) may fall on stressed syllables.
2. Offbeats may be realized by one (o) or two (-o-) unstressed syllables.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 130, l. 3

```
w   s    w   s      w   s   w    s     w    s
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun
o   B    o   B      o   B   o    B     o    B
```

Barbauld, "Washing-Day," l. 77

```
 w  s    w     s     w     s   w   s     w     s
To fold, and starch, and clap, and iron, and plait.
 o  B    o     B     o     B   o   B     o     B
```

choral practice: the idea of order

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard,
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.

choral practice: the idea of order

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practice: round 1

Barbauld, "Washing-Day," ll. 4–5

In slipshod measure loosely prattling on
Of farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream,

Barbauld, “Washing-Day,” l. 4–5

```
w    s   w   s  w    s    w   s   w   s
In slipshod measure loosely prattling on
o    B   o   B  o    B    o   B   o   B
w   s   w  s   w      s  w    s    w     s
Of farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream,
o   B   o  B   o      B  o    B    o     B
```

looseness on the margins

- The first offbeat can be omitted, with a two-syllable offbeat following ("initial inversion").
- The last beat can be followed by an offbeat ("falling/disyllabic ending").

Barbauld, "Washing-Day," ll. 29, 85

Saints have been calm while stretched upon the rack

Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles,

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Barbauld, "Washing-Day," ll. 29, 85

```
 s       w     w     s      w       s       w s     w   s
Saints have been calm while stretched upon the rack
 B         -o-     B      o       B       o B     o   B
```

```
s       s     w      s  w    s  w     s    w     s    w
Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles,
0       B     o      B  o    B  o     B    o     B    o
```

iambic pentameter rules of thumb: promotion

3. A beat may land on an unstressed syllable (b) if its neighbors are also unstressed (or a line start or end).

Stevens, "Idea of Order at Key West," l. 13

The grinding water and the gasping wind;

iambic pentameter rules of thumb: promotion

3. A beat may land on an unstressed syllable (b) if its neighbors are also unstressed (or a line start or end).

Stevens, "Idea of Order at Key West," l. 13

```
  w    s   w     s w   w      w   s   w     s
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
  o    B   o     B o   b      o   B   o     B
```

iambic pentameter rules of thumb: demotion

4. An offbeat may be realized by a stressed syllable (0 or ȯ) so long as its neighbors are stressed (or a line start).

Shelley, "England in 1819," l. 1

An old, mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king,

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.6

Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top

iambic pentameter rules of thumb: demotion

4. An offbeat may be realized by a stressed syllable (`O` or `ȯ`) so long as its neighbors are stressed (or a line start).

Shelley, "England in 1819," l. 1

```
w  s     s     s     w  s     w    sw    s
An old, mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king,
o  B     O     B     o  B     o    Bo    B
```

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.6

```
 s     s    w  s      w  w    w  s  w   s
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
 O     B    o  B      o  b    o  B  o   B
```

iambic pentameter rules of thumb: virtual/implied offbeat

5. An offbeat may be realized by a real ([o]) or notional (ô) pause between two beats on stressed syllables, if compensated by a two-syllable offbeat (-o-) elsewhere in the line.

Shelley, "England in 1819," l. 3

```
   w      s  w     s       s    w    w   s  w     s
Through public scorn---mud from a muddy spring
   o      B  o     B    ô  B       ŏ    B  o     B
   o      B  o     B   [o] B       ŏ    B  o     B
```

Shakespeare, Sonnet 116, l. 1

```
 s    w   s    w    w   s    w     w    s    s
Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 B    o   B   -o-     B    -o-      B ô B
```

summary: iambic pentameter

1. Beats may fall on stressed syllables.
2. Offbeats may be realized by one or two unstressed syllables.
3. A beat may land on an unstressed syllable if its neighbors are also unstressed (or a line start or end).
4. An offbeat may be realized by a stressed syllable so long as its neighbors are stressed (or a line start).
5. An offbeat may be realized by real or notional pause between two beats on stressed syllables, if compensated by a two-syllable offbeat elsewhere in the line.

Remarks

- Virtual beats do not occur, unlike four-beat meters.
- Metrical complexity increases down the list.
- Rule violations (“unmetrical lines”) do happen.
- Lots of poets, especially after 1900, tease the norm but don’t stick to it.

practice: round 2

Shelley, “England in 1819”

practice: round 2

Shelley, "England in 1819"

Scan ll. 4–7 and describe them in terms of departures from the base rules:

Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,
A people starv'd and stabb'd in the untill'd field

tempestuous day

- initial inversion:

```
 s w     w  s   w   s    w   s     w    s
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
 B   -o-    B   o   B    o   B     o    B
```

- promotion:

```
 w   s     w   w    w    s   w    s    w   s
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
 o   B     o   b    o    B   o    B    o   B
```

- implied offbeat with preceding two-syllable offbeat:

```
 w     w    s     s   w    s     w  s   w   s
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,
    ŏ       B [o] B   o    B     o  B   o   B
```

- eleven syllables?!:

```
w  s   w   s     w     s     w    w s  w      s
A people starv'd and stabb'd in the untill'd field
o  B   o   B     o     B       ŏ    B  o      B
```



"A meeting of the radical reformers…" London: J. Evans and Sons, 1819. National Archives (UK). "In a short space of time the Yeomanry came in full gallop upon them."

Shelley jams (I)

ll. 13–14

```
w     s       w    w   w   s  w     s  w   s?
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
o     B       o    B   o   B  o     B  o   B?
 s      w w  s w   w    w  s   w    s
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.
 B       ŏ   B o   B    o  B   o    B
```

Shelley jams (2)

An old, mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king,
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn—mud from a muddy spring,
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know, *know = no*
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,
A people starv'd and stabb'd in the untill'd field,
An army, which liberticide and prey *attested 1789–*
Makes as a two-edg'd sword to all who wield,
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay,
Religion Christless, Godless—a book seal'd,
A Senate—time's worst statute unrepeal'd,
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may *may what?*
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

blank verse

The Measure is English Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of *Homer* in *Greek*, and *Virgil* in *Latin*; Rhime being no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse, in longer Works especially, but the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter; grac't indeed since by the use of some famous modern Poets, carried away by Custom, but much to thir own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse then else they would have exprest them….

True musical delight…consists onely in apt Numbers, fit quantity of Syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like endings, a fault avoyded by the learned Ancients both in Poetry and all good Oratory.

John Milton, "The Verse," in *Paradise Lost*, front matter, in *The John Milton Reading Room*, ed. Thomas H. Luxon (Dartmouth College, 2020).

elevation effects (1797)

little dreaming then
To see, Mongolfier, thy silken ball
Ride buoyant through the clouds—so near approach
The sports of children and the toils of men.
Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles,
And verse is one of them—this most of all.

Barbauld, "Washing-Day," ll. 81–86

elevation effects (1798)

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," ll. 89–103

next: interpreting meter

- Print out: “Casabianca” (from last time) and Robson’s article
- Meter exercise due next Weds.