Principles of Literary Study
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Office hours: Thursdays 11:45–12:45 in MU 040A or by appt.

February 9, 2026. Meter (3): thinking about it.

exercise

- due Wednesday 10 p.m.
- questions?

review: iambic pentameter

- `(o)BoBoBoBoB(o)`
  - a line is in this meter if and only if it fits this pattern
  - but there are multiple ways to fit the pattern
- always mark stressed and unstressed syllables first (`w` `s`)
- then determine beats and offbeats (`B` `o`)
- by default, each `s` is `B` and each `w` is `o`, but…

pentameter rules

1. Beats (B) may fall on stressed syllables.
2. Offbeats may be realized by one (o) or two (-o-) unstressed syllables.
3. A beat may land on an unstressed syllable (promotion: b) if its neighbors are also unstressed (or a line start or end).
4. An offbeat may be realized by a stressed syllable (demotion: O/ȯ) so long as its neighbors are stressed (or a line start).
5. An offbeat may be realized by a real pause (virtual offbeat: [o]) or a notional one (implied offbeat: ô) between two beats on stressed syllables, if compensated by a two-syllable offbeat elsewhere in the line.

metrical complications

```
 w w          s w w s
 -o-          B -o- B

w w w          s s s
o b o          B O B

s   s w w     w w s   s
B ô B -o-     -o- B ô B

s || s w w    w w s || s
B[o] B        -o- B[o] B
```

Shelley's "England in 1819," cont.

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,
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
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
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

tempestuous day

- initial inversion, l. 4:

```
 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, l. 5:

```
 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, l. 6:

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

- l. 7: 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      -o-   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)

```
1   An old, mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king,          A
    o  B     O     B     o  B     o    Bo    B
      s  w     w   s   w    w    s    s      w   s
2   Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow        B
      B    -o-     B    -o-      B  ô B      o   B
         w     s  w    s      s   w   w  s  w    s
3   Through public scorn---mud from a muddy spring,        A
         o     B  o    B  [o] B     -o-  B  o    B
...
13  w     s       w    w   w   s  w     s  w   s?
    Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may          D
    o     B       o    B   o   B  o     B  o   B?
    s      w w  s w   w    w   s   w    s
14  Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.                D
    B      -o-  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

high to low

- Scan your group's assigned quatrain. What do you notice in the meter?

Robson

- What is the thesis?
- How does Robson support it?
- What does this show about the meaning of Hemans's poem?

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

- exercise due Weds.
- rhyme: couplets! print out:
  - “To His Coy Mistress”
  - “Adam’s Curse”
  - “where you are planted”
- Marvell, Swift: hard; use annotations (links in digital file).