

The sound of Shakespeare's verse

Rhythm

English rhythm is made up of a combination of the formal *metre*, the *stress* of the word, and the *quantity* or length of the vowel. The *harshness* or softness of the consonants, and whether the syllable is open or closed by a consonant, will also contribute to the effect.

To name the *metre* (e.g. iambic pentameter) is only to *begin* to analyse the effect of the verse, since English exploits stress, quantity and the sound of the consonants. Poets, especially Shakespeare, exploit the fact that English can choose between words with roots in Latin (or Romance languages) and words with Anglo-Saxon stems. The advantage of the latter for poets is that they are nearly always monosyllabic and harsher, so they can be used to great effect. Look at the sounds of the words in this passage where Enobarbus, in an *apostrophe*, predicts the grim effects of war between the Triumvirs; only two of the words are not monosyllables and there are several *plosives* [p or b] and many *dentals* [d or t]:

Then, world, thou hast a pair of *chaps*, no more; [*chaps* = *jaws*, *chops*]
And throw between them all the food thou hast,
They'll grind the one the other.

The metre of the sonnet is iambic pentameter, but Shakespeare uses both the word-stress and the length of syllables. Look at the long syllables in the opening of *Antony and Cleopatra*, a play that is unusually *expansive* in time and place.

Look where they come.
Take but good note, and you shall see in him
The triple pillar of the world transformed
Into a strumpet's fool. Behold and see.

Here the *long syllables* help establish the lazy, slow time of Egypt.

Metre

The names or terms used to denote this are imported from Greek and Latin *quantitative* verse (i.e. where the verse consists of arrangements of long and short syllables). English, however, is a *stress* language: so metre is measured in *stress/unstress* not long/short.

The metre most suited to English seems to be the *iambic metre*. This can be in iambic *trimeter*, *tetrameter*, *pentameter*, *hexameter* (3, 4, 5, 6 feet). The most popular has been lines in five feet (therefore iambic *pentameter*), and that is Shakespeare's chosen metre. There are, however, important variations to that.

1) It is very common for the first foot to be *reversed*, so that it is in effect a *trochee* (Greek word for a *running* foot). John Donne (1572-1631) provides a wonderful metrical pun (word-play) on this, in his poem on the anniversary of his love:

Only our love hath no decay:
Running, it never runs from us away,
But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day.

[Here the first two lines have a trochaic first foot and then settle into iambic metre, while the last line refuses to stress the word last until it is part of everlasting: their

love will have no last day. The trochaic running shows how different their love is from all other, and the lines get longer and longer (tetrameter, pentameter) and the length of the final hexameter shows how long their love will go on.]

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day
Thou art more lovely and more temperate
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May
And summer's lease hath all too short a date. (Sonnet 18)

But word-stress is used to reinforce metre, or to work in counterpoint to it.

If ever thou didst hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain.

[Here the word stress in the last line adds additional stresses [highlighted in blue], as monosyllabic words necessarily carry a stress. The contrast between the Latinate words in the second line, where the stress of the words matches that of the metre, and which have more melodious consonants, and the harsh Anglo-Saxon monosyllables in the last line is also worth noting.]

For the varied effects of iambic metre, look at these three stanzas (iambic tetrameters) in Lord Tennyson's grief-ridden poem, 'In Memoriam', section VII. The technical metre I have marked in yellow and the extra stresses in blue. The last stanza is remarkable for the thumping effect of the last line, where the light word-stresses of the two definite articles (the) allows the full force to fall on *bald street* and *blank day*. Note the reverse feet (*trochees*) in the second and third lines, and the extra stress on the opening word, *dark*.

Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more—
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

Here, Tennyson thuds home his grief in ten monosyllables in the last two lines (all carrying their own stress) many opening with *plosives* (retnice, exploziva) and closed by *dentals* (dentala) and all pivoting on the central harsh word: *breaks*. Day *breaks*, the line *breaks*, his heart *breaks*. But note the different effects of open and closed syllables: *Dark* is closed, *day* is open, stretching out, offering hope or a perpetual, unending bleak day.

Compare Shakespeare's sonnet:

When I do count the clock that tells the time.

[where the repeated monosyllabic stresses echo the sound of the clock.]

The sonnet and its metre: iambic pentameter

iambic (rising rhythm) : short/long = unstressed/stressed

When **in** **dis****grace** with **for****tu****ne** **and** men's **eyes** (Sonnet 29)

If **I** **pro****fane** with **my** **un****worth****iest** **hand** (*Romeo and Juliet*)

trochaic (running rhythm): long/short = stressed/unstressed

This is very common on the first, 'reversed', foot as in:

Showing their **birth** and **where** they **did** **proceed** (76)

Kind is my **love** **today**, **tomorrow** **kind** (76)

There are many places where the official iambic metre is slowed down by the monosyllabic stress virtually to form a spondee:

spondaic (two longs): two longs = two unstressed

Fair **kind** and **true** is all my argument,
Fair **kind** and **true**, varying to other words (Sonnet 105)

or

Why write I still **á**ll **ó**ne?

Samples for analysis in the seminar:

On the excellent advice of Professor Ososlobe I have deliberately chosen two passages which you have already seen (last week). If you can look through the first of these (Merchant of Venice) and as much of the second as you can, we will try to analyse together the metrical effects and the rhythm. The more you can be familiar with them beforehand, the better. Do as much as you can!

1. *The Merchant of Venice*

Portia: Then must the Jew be merciful.

Jew: On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.

Portia: The quality of mercy is not strain'd:
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heav'n
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
The throned Monarch better than the Crown:
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and Majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of Kings:
But mercy is above this sceptred sway:
It is enthroned in the hearts of Kings:
It is an attribute of God himself:
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons Justice. Therefore Jew . . . (IV.i)

2. *Othello*

'Say it Othello.'

Othello:

Her Father lov'd me, oft invited me:
Still questioned me the Story of my life,
From year to year: the Battle, Sieges, Fortune,
That I have passed:
I ran it through, even from my boyish days,
To the very moment that he bad me tell it
Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances:
Of moving accidents by Flood and Field,
Of haire-breadth scapes i'th'imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the Insolent Foe,
And sold to slavery: of my redemption thence,

And portance in my Travailous history:
Wherein of Antres vast, and Deserts idle,
Rough Quarries, Rocks, Hills, whose head touch heaven,
It was my hint to speak: such was my Process,
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi and men whose heads
Grew beneath their shoulders: these things to hear,
Would Desdemona seriously incline:
But still the house Affairs would draw her hence:
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear,
Devour up my discourse: which I observing,
Took once a pliant hour, and found good means
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart,
That I would all my Pilgrimage dilate,
Whereof by parcels she had something heard,
But not instinctively: I did confess
And often did beguile her of her tears,
When I did speak of some distressful stroke
That my youth suffered: My Story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of kisses:
She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful:
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man: she thank'd me
And bad me, if I had a Friend that lov'd her
I should teach him how to tell my Story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:
She lov'd me for the dangers I had passed,
And I lov'd her that she did pity them:
This only is the witchcraft I have us'd:
Here comes the Lady: Let her witness it. (I.iii)