Introduction to the Dactylic Hexameter

Preface. What follows is not a complete discussion of hexameter verse, but a utilitarian guide to the first principles of recitation. As such, some liberties have been taken for the sake of clarity; but with these principles in mind, students should be able to approach with some confidence the daunting prospect of reading Latin epic aloud.

The Tradition of the Dactylic Hexameter. Before plunging into the technical details, a few introductory words are in order. Greek and Latin poems follow certain rhythmic schemes, or **meters**, which are sometimes highly defined and very strict, sometimes less so. Epic poetry from Homer on was recited in a particular meter called the **dactylic hexameter**. It is fair to say that the dactylic hexameter defines epic. That is, it is impossible to conceive of an epic poem **not** composed in hexameters; and the hexameter rhythms, when heard, signal that the poem being recited is an epic of some sort. (It is true that in Homer's era, epics were more sung than recited, to the accompaniment of a lyre. This was not the practice in Vergil's day, when the spoken word was preferred.)

Fingers. The word **dactylos** is Greek for "finger" (and for "toe" as well, which picks up on the notion of feet, below). The **dactyl** is therefore a snippet of rhythm that resembles, at least aurally, a finger. It has a rhythmic shape consisting of one long syllable (noted as), which represents the long bone, or phalanx, of the finger, plus two short syllables ( ), which represent the two short phalanges. Figure A will illustrate the concept better than any further remarks.
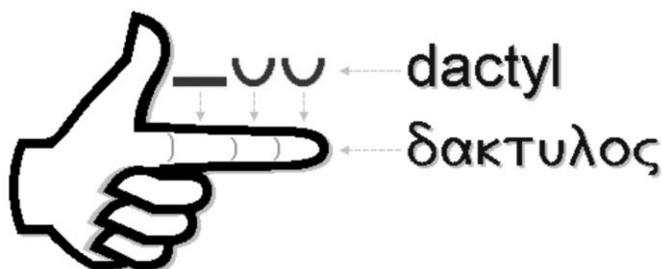

Figure A. The finger-like (dactylic) shape of the dactyl.

In rhythmic terms, the two short syllables are equivalent in tempo to the long syllable, just as in music two half notes equal one whole note (or two eighths equal one quarter, and

so on). In recitation, the dactyl usually sounds like "dum-diddy," with "dum" equal to , and "diddy" to.

Feet. The dactyl serves as the basic rhythmic unit, or **metron**, of hexameter verse. The word **hexameter** also derives from Greek and essentially means "six metrons (or, to be precise, **metra**) in a row." In other words, a single epic verse consists of six successive dactyls, as Figure B shows.
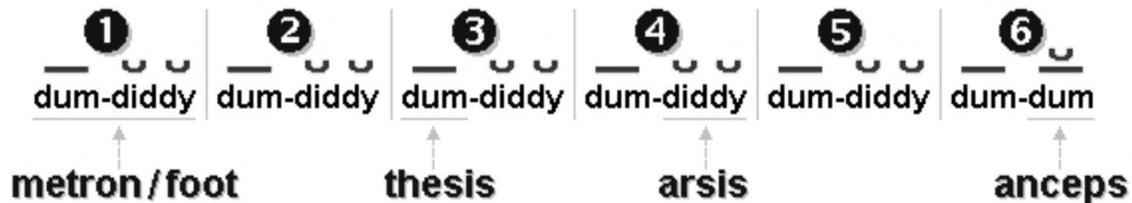

Figure B. Idealized hexameter verse.

Observe that the final metron is technically not a dactyl. Its second syllable is called the **anceps** (Latin for "two-headed"), which is noted either as or . No hexameter verse ends in ; in its place one finds the anceps, which is either short or long□it does not matter. In fact, for purposes of recitation, the anceps is always treated as long to fill out the line. A more common word for metron is **foot**, the idea behind this term being that a line of metra marches past one's ear during recitation. Accordingly, the long syllable, which is the first half of the foot, is called the **thesis** (Greek for "putting down") because the foot is imagined as touching the ground; the two short syllables are therefore called the **arsis** (Greek for "lifting up"), the half in which the foot is raised up...for the next "footstep."

Substitution. The general idea, therefore, is that a poet composes a hexameter verse by placing words into the metrical scheme wherever they best fit. One potential problem is that not every word has one short syllable, let alone two. What to do, then, with words that have only long syllables? The answer is that the meter must become more flexible. Specifically, the poet, at his or her license, may replace (or **contract**) the pair of short syllables in the arsis with (or into) a long syllable: for . The foot is no longer a dactyl, but a **spondee**: for . The term spondee derives from the Greek **spondê**, which means "libation"; spondaic feet, because of their stately, "dum-dum" rhythm, often occurred in songs at solemn drink-offerings. So every foot in a hexameter verse has the potential to be either a dactyl or a spondee. Figure C illustrates this notion.
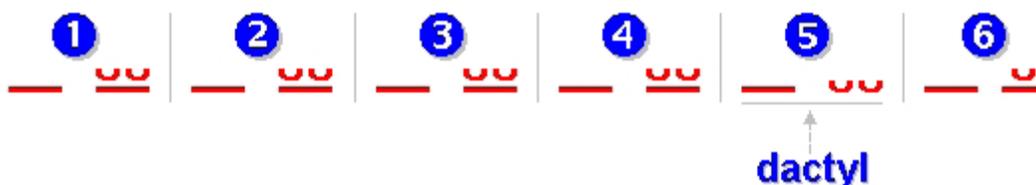

dactyl

Figure C. Idealized hexameter verse, with spondaic contractions.

Note that the fifth foot is depicted as a pure dactyl. This is not to say that it may never be a spondee, but that it is rarely spondaic only when the poet desires (say) some kind of solemn effect.

Scansion Theory. The term **scansion** (from the Latin **scandere**, "to move upward by steps") refers to the process)some would call it an art) of dividing a verse into its metrical components. It also called **scanning**. This process is different from actual recitation, which seeks to preserve both sound and sense along with rhythm; in scansion the primary concerns are to determine whether syllables are long or short and to group them into feet. (Remember that a syllable is a unit of uninterrupted sound in a spoken language. For more on syllables, see below on syllabification.)

Scanning is good preparation for recitation, but with practice one can easily recite and scan simultaneously. Here are three rules-of-thumb for determining whether syllables are long or short.

- A **short syllable** contains a **short quantity vowel**, such as the nominative singular ending of the first declension: .
- A **long syllable** contains a **long quantity vowel**, such as the ablative singular of the first declension: .
- A **long syllable** may also contain a **diphthong** (two vowels pronounced together), such as the genitive singular of the first declension: . The -au- in nauta is also considered long under this rule.

In all of the above examples, the syllables are short or long **by nature**; that is, the Romans naturally pronounced them as such, having learned their vowel quantities during the process of acquiring Latin. What this means for students new to the language is that quantities must be memorized or checked in a glossary or dictionary (no small task either way). Fortunately, there is often a way of circumventing the issue via one more rule:

- A syllable is considered **long** when **directly followed by two consonants**, whether in the same word or beginning the subsequent word. For instance, if the nominative immediately precedes the verb **scit**, the final -a becomes long **by position**: **scit**. This rule is not ironclad, as certain consonant combinations like -cr, -pr, and –tr will not "make position."
- A short vowel followed by a "mute" consonant and a "liquid" consonant may either be long or short as the verse requires.
  Mutes: b, c, d, g, p, q, t
  Liquids: l, r

  Combinations: bl, br, cl, cr, dr, gr, pl, pr, tl, tr

  may be long or short as needed: patres or pātres

Basic Scansion.
Below is the first line of the **Aeneid** , scanned according to the preceding four rules (Figure D). reading strictly metrical, no frills

Figure D. Scansion of *Aeneid* 1.1.

Note that the theses of feet one and two are long by position. All other syllables are either long orshort by nature. Note also that divisions between feet do not necessarily correspond to those between words. So, for example, it takes an entire word ( ) plus part of another (-) to comprise the first dactyl. Still, the last foot ( ) is all contained within a single word.

Syllabification.
Drawing a line between feet often means drawing a line between syllables. **arma virumque cano**, for example, is broken up as **arma vi | rumque ca | no**. But why not **arma vir | umque can | o**? For the answer one must remember the basic rules for **syllabification**, or dividing words up into their syllables.

- Syllables are usually divided **between a vowel and a single consonant**: **vi-rum**, not **virum**.
- When a vowel is followed by two consonants in the same word, the divison comes **between the** consonants: **ar-ma**, not **arm-a** or **a-rma**.

The exception to this rule when a vowel is followed by a **stop** (a consonant formed by complete air blockage, e.g. **t**, **d**, **p**, **b**, **k**, **g**) plus a **liquid** (a consonant that can be prolonged, e.g. **l** or **r**).

So **patres** divides as **pa-tres**, not **pat-res**. A stop-liquid combination, as a matter of fact, will not "make position" for a vowel: the -a- in **patres** scans as short, not long.

Elision.
The contraction of dactyls into spondees, we have seen, provides a certain flexibility, allowing more opportunities for word placement within a verse. Sometimes syllables were ignored altogether through a process called **elision** (Latin for "knocking out"), which ensured further flexibility.

The first rule of elision is as follows:

- A **final syllable ending in a vowel** may be omitted from the meter **before a word beginning with a vowel** (or an h-).

EXAMPLE: The phrase is technically three syllables long; but because **est** begins with a vowel and **nauta** ends with one, the final -a is elided "knocked out," ignored for a total of two syllables: (pronounced something like "now test").

Note how the rule states that the syllable **may** be omitted: it need not always be. The term for deliberate avoidance of elision is called **hiatus** (Latin for "gap").

The second rule of elision is much the same as the first:

● A **final syllable ending in the letter -m** may be omitted from the meter **before a word beginning with a vowel** (or an h-). So is elided to (again, "now test").

Figure E illustrates both rules at work within **Aeneid** 1.3.
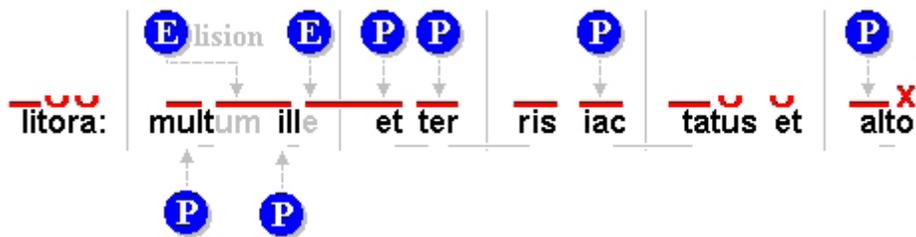

Figure E. Scansion of *Aeneid* 1.3.

As the presence of two audio files indicates, there are two schools of thought regarding elided syllables in recitation: they are either pronounced very lightly or completely suppressed.

Pauses. Within every verse comes at least one opportunity for a pause, a brief halting during the reading of the line. This pause, called a **caesura** (Latin for "cut") often accompanies a pause in the sense, and lets one idea sink in before another is introduced. Thus, **caesurae** always occur between two words, one at the end and one at the beginning of a clause. Furthermore, a caesura always appears in the middle of a foot, in one of two places:

● either **between the thesis and the arsis** or
● **within the arsis** itself, between the two shorts.

Figure F illustrates both kinds of caesura:

Figure F. Strong and weak caesurae.

Caesurae within the arsis are considered **weak**, while those following a thesis are **strong**. In theory a caesura may occur in any of the six feet, and in fact most verses have two or more caesurae. The **principal caesura** marks the most obvious pause in the sense, and is usually in the third foot (although it often appears in the second and fourth feet as well). Figure G illustrates the many possibilities for caesurae in **Aeneid** 1.1.
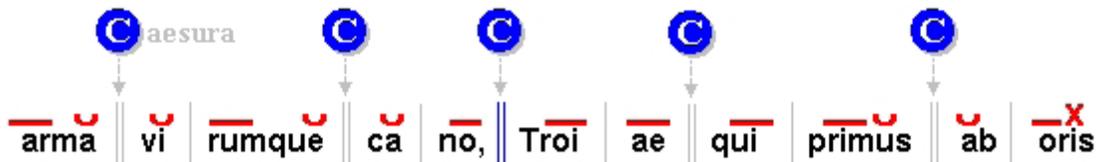
Reading principal caesura emphasized

Figure G. Caesurae in *Aeneid* 1.1.

As you can see, there are no less than five caesurae in this line. But the principal one is in foot three, marking the pause between the main clause, **arma virumque cano**, and the relative clause **qui primus ab oris Troiae**. When the third foot contains the principal caesura, and when that caesura is strong, it is possible to sing the verse to the melody of first two measures of the **Stars andStripes Forever** .

Reading Aeneid 1.1 sung to the tune of Stars and Stripes Forever

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Verse divisions. You may have observed that in dividing up a verse into feet, the divisions must often be made within the words themselves, so that the boundaries between feet rarely correspond to the boundaries between words. But when the end of a foot also coincides with the end of a word, the resulting division is called a **diaeresis** ("division" in Greek). A diaeresis differs from a caesura in two respects. First, it occurs between, not within, feet. Second, it does not necessarily mark any discernible pause in the sense. Figure H shows these differences at work.
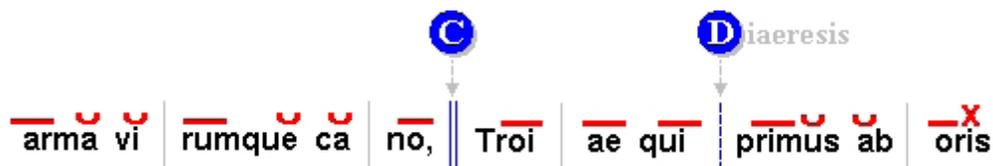

Figure H. The diaeresis and main caesura of *Aeneid* 1.1.

Again, the caesura clearly marks the sense-pause between **cano** and **Troiae**, while the diaeresis even though it marks a division between the fourth and fifth feet, as well as between **qui** and **primus** shows no pause in the sense.

So, why bother to mark a diaeresis at all? The answer is that a division like the one shown in Figure H is perceived as a distinct metrical unit that takes on a life of its own. In other words,

primus ab oris ends the verse with a very recognizable "dum-diddy dum-dum" (or "shave and a haircut" or, in the UK, "strawberry jam-pot"), a rhythmic snippet made all the more recognizable by the fact that **primus** begins a new foot. The diaeresis between feet four and five is called the **bucolic diaeresis**, after the Greek **boukolos**, "herdsman," because the dactylic poetry of herdsmen was notorious for "shave and a haircut" line endings.

Recitation. Thus far the readings in the audio files have been very mechanical: strong theses followed by light arses (DUM-diddy), all in strict tempo. They must be so for the sake of theory. In practice, however, the hexameter verse is much more resilient and allows for some license on the reader's part: pauses, for example, or quickening of tempo can lend great dramatic effect. In fact, there are points in every line where strict meter will not do. These tend to come at the beginning of a line, when the stress placed upon the thesis conflicts with the natural accentuation of a word. For example, **cano** in **Aeneid** 1.1; the word is naturally accented on the first syllable: **CA-no**. But observance of the meter requires the unnatural pronunciation **ca-NO**, which would have made any good Roman cringe. Note, however, that meter and nature combine toward the end of the line. After the fourth foot, following the bucolic diaeresis, **primus ab oris** (**PRI-mus ab O-ris**) reads both metrically and naturally.

Figure I offers the first seven lines of the **Aeneid** in full scansion. Note that all principal caesurae are marked, as are bucolic diaereses, when they occur.

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1  arma vi | rumque ca | no, ‖ Troi | ae qui ⁞ primus ab | oris
   Itali | am fa | to profu | gus ‖ La | vinaque | venit
   litora | —multumil | leet ter | ris ‖ iac | tatus et | alto
   vi supe | rum, ‖ sae | vae memo | rem Iu | nonis ob | iram,
5  multa quo | queet bel | lo pas | sus, ‖ dum ⁞ conderet | urbem
   infer | retque de | os Lati | o ‖ —genus ⁞ unde La | tinum
7  Alba | nique pa | tres ‖ at | quealtae ⁞ moenia | Romae.
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reading a   sound, sense, and meter

reading b   sound, sense, and meter (Prof. R. Sonkowsky). warning: long load time

Figure I. Complete scansion of *Aeneid* 1.1-7.

A Final Word. When learning how to read in meter, it is better to read mechanically at first, just to get a sense of the rhythm. In time, the ear becomes more discerning, and one's readings become more sensitive and sophisticated. The key, of course, is practice...or as Vergil wrote, **labor omnia vicit** (**Georgics** 1.145).