Talking about Poetry: Meter

Scansion means analyzing a passage of verse to determine its meter, which generally refers to a line’s type of foot and number of feet per line.

Types of feet:

1) **Iambic**: a light syllable followed by a stressed syllable
   
   Ex. The cur few tolls the knell of parting day.

2) **Anapestic**: two light syllables followed by a stressed syllable (think of the sound of a horse’s hooves)
   
   Ex. The Asyrian came down like a wolf on the fold.

3) **Trochaic**: a stressed followed by a light syllable
   
   Ex. There they are, my fifty men and women.

   Most trochaic lines lack the final unstressed syllable and so are called *catalectic*.
   
   Ex. Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
       In the forest of the night.

4) **Dactylic**: a stressed syllable followed by two light syllables
   
   Ex. Eve, with her basket, was
       Deep in the bells and grass.

   *Rising meter*: strong stress is at the end (iambs and anapests)

   *Falling meter*: strong stress is at the beginning (trochees and dactyls)

   *Duple meter*: contains two syllables (iambs and trochees)

   *Triple meter*: contains three syllables (anapests and dactyls)

   Occasional variants from these four standard types of feet:

5) **Spondaic**: two successive syllables with approximately equal strong stresses
   
   Ex. Good strong thick stupeying in cense smoke. (1st two feet)

6) **Pyrrhic**: two successive syllables with approximately equal light stresses
   
   Ex. My way is to be gin with the be gin ning (2nd and 4th feet)

Naming metric lines according to number of feet per line:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monometer: one foot</th>
<th>Pentameter: five feet</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimeter: two feet</td>
<td>Hexameter: six feet (Alexandrine = a line of six iambic feet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimeter: three feet</td>
<td>Heptameter: seven feet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tetrameter: four feet</td>
<td>Octameter: eight feet</td>
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</table>
Other ways of describing meter (using the first five lines of Keats’s *Endymion*):

--- **feminine ending**: describes a line that ends with an unstressed syllable (lines 1, 2, 5)

--- **masculine ending**: describes a line that ends with a stressed syllable (lines 3, 4)

--- **end-stopped**: describes a line that ends at a natural pause in the reading, such as the end of a sentence, clause, or other syntactic unit (lines 1, 5)

--- **enjambement** (run-on lines): describes a line that ends in an incompletely completed syntactic unit, so that it forces the reader to push into the next line (lines 2 through 4)

--- **caesura**: a strong phrasal pause within a line (lines 2, 3, 4)

1. A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
2. Its loveliness increases; it will never
3. Pass into nothingness, but still will keep
4. A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
5. Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

**Non-stress-based meter**

**Strong-stress meter**: only the beat of the strong stresses counts in the scanning; number of unstressed syllables is highly variable. In Old English (and some Middle English) poetry, lines usually had four stresses that were emphasized by alliteration and often by medial caesura (known as *alliterative verse*).

Ex. In a somer seson, when soft was the sonne,
    I shope me in shroudes, as I a shepe were,
    In habits like an heremite, unholy of workes,
    Went wyde in this world, wonders to here.

**Sprung rhythm**: a type of strong-stress verse invented by Gerard Hopkins in the late nineteenth century. Each foot begins with a stressed syllable and may contain from one to three light syllables. Number of light stresses is highly variable, and strong stresses are strikingly offset between lines.

Ex. The sour scythe cringe, and the blear share come.
    Our hearts’ charity’s hearth’s fire, our thoughts’ chivalry’s throng’s Lord.

**Free verse**: lines have no or only occasional metric feet or uniform stress patterns.*