

The Latin Elegiac Couplet

[See J.W. Halporn *et al.*, *The Meters of Greek and Latin Poetry*, pp. 67-72.]

Sigla:

Long/Heavy syllable (*longum*): –

Short/Light syllable (*breve*): ∪

Substitution of *longum* for two *brevia* permitted: ≡

Anceps: ×

Foot division: |

Caesura: || (see below)

Diaeresis: || (see below)

Bridge: ∩ (place in the line where word ending is avoided)

Dactyl: – ∪ ∪

Spondee: – –

Basic metrical pattern of the elegiac couplet: hexameter + pentameter

– ≡ | – ≡ | – || ≡ | – || ≡ || – ∪ ∪ | – ∩ × ¹

– ≡ | – ≡ | – || – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ ∩ ×

¹In the Augustan poets a fifth-foot spondee in dactylic hexameter is rare, as are lines ending in a monosyllable (other than an elided *est*: e.g., Ov. *Am.* 1.3.1: *iusta precor: quae me nuper praedata puella est*) — but cf. Horace, *Ars Poetica* 139: *parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*.

Dactylic Hexameter

The Caesura

Caesura (a “cutting”): word end, often with attendant pause, *within* a foot. Each line should have at least one principal caesura.

Common caesurae:

Third foot, strong (the penthemimeral caesura):

– ∞ – ∞ – || ∞ – ∞ – ∞ – x ²

Arma gravi numero || *violentaque bella parabam* (Ov. Am. 1.1.1)

Fourth foot, strong (the hephthemimeral caesura):

– ∞ – ∞ – ∞ – || ∞ – ∞ – x

par erat inferior versus; || *risisse Cupido* (Ov. Am. 1.1.3)

Rarer:

Third foot, weak:

– ∞ – ∞ – ∞ || ∞ – ∞ – ∞ – x ³

nox et Amor || *vinumque* || *nihil* || *moderabile suadent* (Ov. Am. 1.6.59)

Diaeresis

Diaeresis (a “taking apart”): word end, often with attendant pause, *between* two feet (contrast caesura). In hexameter verse the most important diaeresis is known as the “bucolic diaeresis” and occurs between the fourth and fifth foot:

– ∞ – ∞ – ∞ – ∞ || – ∞ – x ⁴

vidi ego iactatas || *mota face* || *crescere flammas* (Ov. Am. 1.2.11)

²This is the most common caesura of all. (Note that the so-called pentameter of the elegiac couplet actually consists of the metrical pattern leading up to the penthemimeral caesura [called a *hemiepes*], repeated.)

³This caesura usually will be combined with strong caesuras in the second and fourth feet.

⁴The fourth foot usually is trisyllabic in such lines.

Scansion

When Ajax strives, some Rock's vast Weight to throw,
The Line too *labours*, and the Words move slow.
(Pope, *Essay on Criticism* 370-371)

Final *m* (e.g., *-um*, *-am*, *-em*) does not prevent elision:
... *donis opulent(um) et numine divae* (*Aeneid* 1.447)

The letter *h* is ignored for purposes of scansion:

hic currus fuīt; hoc regnum dea gentibus esse (*Aeneid* 1.17)
non potuisse tuaqu(e) anim(am) hanc effundere dextra (*Aeneid* 1.98)

Mute (*p*, *b*, *c*, *t*) + liquid/nasal (*r*, *l*, *m*, *n*) — might or might not make position.

E.g. — *Albanique pātres* (*Aeneid* 1.7) vs. *soliti pātres* (*Aeneid* 7.176)

Semi-consonantal *i* (*j*) can form part of a diphthong: e.g., *Trōiae* (to be read as a spondee: pronounced “Troī-yī”). Note that this does not apply to words beginning in *i-* to which a prefix has been added: e.g., *bīiugus* (= *bī + iugum*).

Double consonants: *x*, *z*⁵

Terms:

Elision:

litora — mult(um) ill(e) et terris iactatus et alto (*Aeneid* 1.3)

Hiatus:

posthabita coluisse Samō: hic illius arma (*Aeneid* 1.16)

Less important are:

Correption (Semi-hiatus):

nomen et arma locum servant; tē, amice, nequivi (*Aeneid* 6.507)

Synapheia:⁶

iactemur doceas; ignar(i) hominumque locorumque / erramus (*Aeneid* 1.332-333)

Synizesis:

iam valid(am) Ilionei navem, iam fortis Achatae (*Aeneid* 1.120)

⁵ Note: *ch*, *ph*, and *th* represent aspirated consonants (Grk. χ, φ, θ) and do not make position.

⁶ Also known as synalephe. In English verse this phenomenon is often referred to as enjambment or a “run-on” line, although in English poetry one is usually alluding to syntax rather than scansion.