

Notes on dactylic hexameter and the scansion of Latin verse

See:

- P.V. Jones and K.C. Sidwell, *Reading Latin: Grammar, Vocabulary, and Exercises*, appendix to grammar for Unit 5A
C. Pharr, *Vergil's Aeneid, Books I-VI: Grammatical Appendix*, sections 391-410
J.W. Halporn, M. Oswald, T.G. Rosenmeyer *The Meters of Greek and Latin Poetry* (revised edition: Norman, Oklahoma, 1980) pp. 67-71.
S.G. Daitz, *The Pronunciation and Reading of Classical Latin*. New York, Guilford, and London, 1984.
R.P. Sonkowsky, *Latin Aloud*. Wauconda, 2007.
G.E. Duckworth, *Vergil and Classical Hexameter Poetry*. Ann Arbor, 1969.

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: – –

Dactylic Hexameter: 1 2 3 4 5 6
 – ∞ | – ∞ | – || ∞ | – || ∞ || – ∞ | – ∩ × 1

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 fuī; *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)

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*.

Semi-consonantal *i* (*j*) can form part of a diphthong: e.g., *Troiae* (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*²

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)

Caesura (a “cutting”): Word end, often with attendant pause, *within* a foot.

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

Diaeresis: A place in the line where word ending is common 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.

arma virumque cano, Troiae qui || primus ab oris (*Aeneid* 1.1)

Bridge: A place in the line where word ending is avoided.

Less important are:

Correption (Semi-hiatus):

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

Synapheia:³

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

Synizesis:

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

Musa, mihi causas memora, quo numine laeso

quidve dolens regina deum tot volvere casus

insignem pietate virum, tot adire labores

impulerit. Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?

² Note: *ch*, *ph*, and *th* represent aspirated consonants (Grk. χ, φ, θ) and do not make position.

³ 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.

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):

– ̄ – ̄ – || ̄ – ̄ – ̄ – x⁴

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:

– ̄ – ̄ – ̄ || ̄ – ̄ – ̄ – x⁵

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:

– ̄ – ̄ – ̄ – ̄ || – ̄ – x⁶

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

⁴This 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.)

⁵This caesura usually will be combined with strong caesuras in the second and fourth feet.

⁶The fourth foot usually is trisyllabic in such lines.