

Vergil's versification

Vergil's poems are metrical, that is, the main basis of the poetry is the sound of it being spoken, and the sound is rhythmical.

The rhythm depends on Vergil's arrangement of the words to produce regular patterns of syllables, distinguished by the length of the vowels and the weight of the syllables. Rhyme is not a deliberate feature of poetry in any European literary language before about AD1200.

Virgil's lines are hexameters: that is to say each line contains six *metra* ('measures') or **feet**. A foot consists of more than one syllable, not necessarily in the same word. In fact, for metrical purposes, the whole line is treated as a single word, and word-boundaries are ignored.

In the Aeneid, there are two types of foot: the dactyl and the spondee. These feet can produce contrasting feelings and effects upon the reader.

First, you need to understand how **syllables** work in Latin. At the very least, a syllable may consist of a single sound, a vowel. More often they begin with a consonant or two, and quite often they end in a consonant or two. If you find vowels connected by single consonants, the consonants each belong to the following vowel to make up a syllable, for example:

gla-di-o-s a-cu-to-s ha-be-bant (*gladios acutos habebant*)

There are two types of syllable, heavy and light. If a syllable is 'open', that is, is not closed by one or more consonants, and if its vowel is short, it is **light**. If however it contains a long vowel, or ends in one or more consonants, it is **heavy**. In Latin there is a preponderance of heavy syllables.

In Virgil's Aeneid, except for the 'short' lines, each line has six feet. The first 4 may be either dactyls or spondees, the fifth is nearly always a dactyl, and the sixth a spondee (or a 'trochee'). Thus the pattern of a line will be:

- uu | - uu | - uu | - uu | - uu | - u (the fifth foot is nearly always a dactyl)

where - shows a heavy syllable, and u shows a light syllable.

Thus we have two types of foot, a *spondee* - - and a *dactyl* - u u (meaning 'finger')

Example: visus a | desse mi | hi, lar | gosqu(e) ef | fundere | fletus

(the long vowels are underlined)

Note *elision*: terminal vowels elide before initial vowels (largosqu(e) effundere)

Final m is not a consonant but shows that the vowel is nasalised and long. It can therefore be elided.

h does not count in scansion but can be a syllable-divider, as in *mih*i above.

JH