

Sound and Sense in Greek Poetry

The sound of the words in a line of Greek or Latin poetry was more important to a reading of a poem than the comparable reading of an English poem, because all Greek and Latin poetry would have been read aloud, frequently to a group but even by a reader reading to himself. Greek and Roman verse differs from English in that English poetry depends on the stress accent (quality) for its meter, while Greek and Latin depend on the length of syllables (quantity). Latin does have a stress accent, but it is not used as the basis for metrical feet and Greek's accent is pitch, rather than stress. The syllables in a Greek or Latin word will be long or short (take more time or less time to say) according to various rules (a long vowel and a vowel followed by two consonants will give a long syllable) and the pattern of longs and shorts (e.g. -- - - for a dactyl) will form the metrical feet from which the lines of verse are built.

Greek and Latin authors, like English authors, can use particular patterns of sound (regular or varied) to correlate with the sense of what is being said.

In Catullus 4, the author (a contemporary of Julius Caesar) uses iambic senarius meter, comparable in its use to Shakespeare's iambic pentameter (the meter of his sonnets). An iambic foot has a short (or, in English, unaccented) syllable followed by a long (or, in English, accented/ stressed) syllable, and a senarius has six such feet, a pentameter five. Normally, iambic senarius is varied in its rhythms, as is iambic pentameter. The variations come from substitutions of a trochee (-- -) or a spondee (-- --) for the iamb (- --) and from variations in word length, pauses in the lines and coincidence or not of the normal prose accent and the metrically stressed syllables (those that make up the abstract metrical pattern). A poet can write 100 lines in the same meter and still have very different sounding sections by using these variations, and Catullus normally varies his iambic senarii a great deal – except in this poem and in one other. The poem's central character is a little yacht, now at the end of its career, telling about itself and all the places it's been. Does the sing-song nature of the very regular meter here suggest that the yacht is just babbling on and on? Perhaps.

The galliambics of Catullus 63, on the other hand, produce a wild, irregular meter, consistent with the wildness of the subject matter, the goddess Cybele and her ecstatic priests and wild music.

Homer's meter, like all epic, was dactylic hexameter, six feet of long/short/short (-- --). It was always permissible to substitute a spondee (-- --) for a dactyl, and the last foot will always be a spondee or a trochee, but, whatever other substitutions the poet might admit, the fifth foot will virtually always be a dactyl. Only one line in Homer is 100% spondaic – at the funeral of Achilles' best friend, Patroclus. Since dactylic hexameter was always (and only) the meter of epic, it seems that there is a correlation with the subject matter there also. When Ovid starts writing love poetry in his *Amores* he starts with a line of dactylic hexameter, but then claims Cupid has stolen away one foot from him and makes the next line pentameter. The resulting meter, elegiac couplet, is definitely not the meter of heroic events, so the sound of it must have seemed less epic to Greeks and Romans.

The accompanying pages show you how Homer's verse works. You see the actual Greek, a transliteration into the Roman alphabet of the Greek, and a scanned (marked off into metrical feet with the long and short marks indicated).

You can also see how an oral poet (or at least one who is not reciting completely from memory a set piece) can use formulaic phrases to fill in particular parts of the line as he is composing in front of an audience.