

AN ELEMENTARY INTRODUCTION TO LATIN QUANTITATIVE METER FOR USERS OF THE *BREVIARIUM ROMANUM*

Many users of the Breviary who read it in the original Latin often are unaware of the full poetic beauty of the hymns because they have never studied Latin **prosody**, the theory of the rhythmic structure of *verse*. English verse is accentual, characterized by patterns of accented (stressed) and unaccented (unstressed) syllables. Most of the hymns of the Breviary, however, follow the conventions of classical Latin verse, where the rhythm depends not so much on the accent or stress of the syllable but on the **quantity** or vowel length (long or short) of a syllable.

The artistic arrangement of syllables in a determined order (rhythmic pattern), is called **meter**. A meter is made up of a definite number of specified rhythmic elements called **feet**, which correspond to the bars in music. The basic rhythmic unit of measure in Latin meter is the *mora*, represented by the **breve** mark (◡). It has the musical value of an eighth note, and represents the length of time it takes to pronounce a syllable that is considered short. Two *mora* (marked ◡ ◡) constitute the length of time it takes to pronounce a long syllable, marked by the **marcon** (—). Such a syllable has the musical value of a quarter note.

Fundamental Rules of Quantity

The fundamental rule of Latin quantity is as follows: **a syllable is long by nature when it contains a long vowel or a diphthong** (e.g., the *-ā* in the ablative singular or the *-æ* of the genitive singular of the first declension). The rules for determining quantity are exceedingly complex, so for this introduction we must make do with just a handful of highly simplified *rules of thumb*. Bear in mind that there will many exceptions:

1. Most *monosyllables* ending in a vowel or single consonant are long (e.g. *ē*, *sōl*). Exceptions occur with consonants *b, d, m, t* (e.g., *dūm*, *ād*).
2. Final syllables ending in a simple consonant other than *s* are short.
3. Most vowels before another vowel or *h* are short.
4. Final *a* is short (if it is not an ablative, an imperative, a numeral, or a preposition).
5. Final *e* is short.
6. Final *i* is long.
7. Final *o* is long.
8. Final *u* is long.
9. A syllable is long by position if a short vowel is followed by (a) two consonants, one of which may occur as the first letter of the following word or (b) by a double consonant (*x, z*) or (c) by *consonantal i (=j)*. E.g., (a) *ādvēntus*, (b) *cortēx*, (c) *māior* (*major*).
10. A short syllable followed by a stop, viz., *p, b, [f], t, [th], d, c, [ch], g* followed in turn by *l* or *r* ('liquids') is considered *common*, i.e., it may be long *or* short, at the poet's pleasure.

Versification

Versification is the art and practice of metrical composition. The simplest *mechanical* elements of Latin verse composition are *feet* and *rhythmical series*.

1. FEET

of three *mora*Iamb ∪ — (adjective form: *iambic*)Trochee — ∪ (adjective form: *trochaic*)

Or

of four *mora*Dactyl — ∪ ∪ (adjective form: *dactylic*)Spondee — — (adjective form: *spondaic*)Anapest ∪ ∪ — (adjective form: *anapestic*)

2. RHYTHMICAL SERIES AND EQUALITY OF FEET

A *rhythmical series* is a continuous succession of feet; a rhythmical series takes its name from the number of feet that compose it.

2 feet (dipody) = dimeter

3 feet (tripody) = trimeter

4 feet (tetrapody) = tetrameter

5 feet (pentapody) = pentameter

6 feet (hexapody) = hexameter

The adjective form of the name of the foot together with the name of the rhythmical series is the meter. Thus four feet of trochees (or the equivalent) is *trochaic tetrameter*. Six feet of dactyls (or the equivalent) is *dactylic hexameter*. Sometimes divisions called stanzas or strophes are made up of a *combination* of feet and rhythms, as in the **logaedic** (“speech-song”) rhythms of Horace, upon which many hymns of the *Breviary* are modeled; these rhythms appear to be intricate mixtures of trochees and dactyls.

In principle, just as musical strains are composed of equal bars, so verses have equal feet (marked apart by the symbol |). Expressive language, however, brings with it violations of the rhythmic principle. Three means of restoring this equality are

1. **correption**, which is the shortening of a syllable to suit the measure; a long syllable can take the place of a short one, but it will occupy less time. For example, in the hymn for the *Common of Virgins at Matins* below, line 2, the rhythmic scheme of the first foot of the Horatian sapphic demands a trochee (a long and a short syllable, — ∪); however, the poet chose to begin with the word *Virgō*, a spondee (two long syllables, — —). Now a trochee is a foot of three beats and a spondee is of four beats or times (remember that one — = ∪ ∪), so the language choice of the poet has violated the rule that a rhythmical series comprise equal parts. By allowing the final **o** of *virgō* to have a length of one *mora* instead of the two required by the actual length of the long vowel, the poet restores the ratio of beats or the equality of the rhythmical series;

2. **syllaba anceps** (“two-headed” or “uncertain syllable”), which allows the final syllable of a verse to be short or long depending on the requirements of the meter. In metrical schemes, *syllaba anceps* is indicated by the sign \cup ; and
3. **catalexis** and **pause**, which occur when a verse is incomplete, i.e. does not end in enough syllables to fill out the required meter of the line. The missing time is made up and filled in by a pause in recitation (like a rest note).

Another kind of pause—one that helps keep the rhythm from becoming monotonous—is the *cæsura* or a cutting of a line of verse in two. The *cæsura* results from a word ending in the middle of a verse foot. One common notation is | |.

Scansion

Marking the length of syllables (viz., writing above each syllable a macron, —, or a breve, \cup) and thereby identifying the meter is called **scansion**. Below are seven steps for **scanning** (identifying syllable length) Latin quantitative verse.

1. Mark each instance of *elision* and *ecthipsis* by placing a curved, subscripted tie or bind mark (\cup) under the eliding syllables (e.g., **Et pio fumant redolentque_uacerræ**. (Elision occurs when a word ends with a vowel and the next begins with a vowel or **h**; the first vowel is elided or slurred over. Ecthipsis occurs when a final **m** with its short vowel (*Rules of Quantity*, 1 & 2, above) is elided before a vowel or **h**).
2. Mark all diphthongs as long.
3. Mark all syllables that are long by nature (based on your knowledge of Latin forms).
4. Mark all syllables that are long by position (but bear in mind that **p,b,[f],t,[th],d,c,[ch],g**, followed by **l** or **r** [i.e. a stop followed by a liquid] may be long *or* short depending on the meter).
5. When scanning hymns in the *Roman Breviary* or *Missal*, use the printed acute accent marks (á,é,í,ó,ú,æ) printed over vowels and the Law of Penultimate Accent* in Latin to help you determine the quantity of the penult. (E.g. **puerile** = **puerile**, **Hosánna** = **Hosānna**; **cælicus** = **cælicus**, **términum** = **termīnum**)
6. Mark all other vowels short. Remember Harkness's Rule: *All vowels are to be treated as short unless there are good reasons for believing them to be long.*
7. Guess at the meter by comparing models, counting syllables, and marking feet.

EXAMPLES

The quantitative meters described below are the most commonly found in the Roman Breviary. Note that the schemata used may differ from those given in other reference books. An accessible yet thorough treatment may be found in D.S. Raven's *Latin Metre* (1965). In addition, reference grammars of Latin contain detailed sections on prosody.

IAMBIC DIMETER (AMBROSIAN)

Quantitative dimeter has four iambic feet, each **metron** (“the irreducible unit of movement in any given rhythm”—Raven) having two feet, and the meter tolerates much freedom with both correction and especially *syllaba anceps*. This is the most frequently found meter in the breviary. The basic scheme is as follows (but much variation is found):

⏟ — ∪ — | ⏟ — ∪ — (or ⏟)

—
 Ætērnē rērūm Cōndītōr
 Nōctēm dĩēmquē quī rēgīs
 Ēt tēmpōrūm dās tēmpōrā
 Ūt āllēvēs fāstīdīum
Sunday Lauds

HORATIAN STROPHES

The very elegant metrical forms of the Roman lyric poet Horace are represented by two types of stanzas or *strophes*. These meters, sometimes called “aeolic,” do not have a regular measure of feet, so to speak, but rather a basic metrical core, which the ancients called a *choriamb* (— ∪∪ —). (In the examples below, we have relied on F. Villeneuve’s simplified schemata rather than the more complex notation found in reference grammars.)

1. SAPPHIC = 3 hendecasyllabic (11 syllables) Sapphics

— ∪ | — — | — || ∪∪ | — ∪ | — ⏟

and 1 Adonic

— ∪∪ | — ⏟

Vīrgīnīs prōlēs ōpīfēxquē mātrīs
 Vīrgō quēm gēssīt pēpēritquē vīrgō
 Vīrgīnīs pārtōs cānīmūs dēcōrā
 Mōrtē trīūmphōs
Common of Virgins at Matins

For the modern ear, it is sometimes difficult to “feel” these subtle rhythms. Below is a celebrated example of an effort to render the rhythmic effects of the Sapphic into English (Swinburne):

*All the night sleep came not upon my eyelids
 Shed with den, nor shook nor unclosed a feather,
 Yet with lips shut close and with eyes of iron,
 Stood and beheld me.*

2. ASCLEPIADEAN = 3 lesser Asclepiads

— — | — ∪ ∪ | — | | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪

and 1 Glyconic

— — | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ | ∪

Cūstōdēs hōmīnūm psāllimūs Āngēlōs,

Nātūrāe frāgīlī quōs Pātēr āddīdīt

Cāēlestīs cōmītēs, īnsīdīāntībūs

Nē succūmbērēt hōstībūs.

Guardian Angels at Vespers and Matins

For a sense of the rhythmic effects, here is Fr. Mulcahy's imitation of Asclepiadean in his translation:

*We sing the good angels, guardian companions,
Frail nature's fond helpers, kind Father sends to us
From heaven graciously, lest to our enemies,
Harm still plotting, we fall a prey.*

Exercises

Find the following hymns in the *Breviary*, scan the first strophe, and identify the meter:

1. Vespers, Most Holy Rosary
2. Sunday Matins (Pentecost III to Sunday nearest Oct.1)
3. Lauds of St. Martina

"Challenge"

4. Hymn for First Vespers, Ss. Peter and Paul
5. Hymn for Matins, *Corpus Christi*. What makes this hymn prosodically different from other Breviary hymns?