

## POETICALLY SPEAKING

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## SCANSION: IS IT IMPORTANT?

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## Systems for Scansion

Scansion of verses is often thought of as unnecessary, and to a point this may be correct. In most cases, it is doubtful whether the poet is interested in the scansion of their verses, especially if they read well enough to satisfy. It is mainly when variations are introduced or there is some experimentation that scansion will be a necessity for the poet.

Regardless, there are many systems for scansion which basically differ in the type of symbols and the way they are used. Examples are macron-breve and ictus-breve. Taking an iambic pentameter verse from Shakespeare's **Sonnet XVII**, it may be represented as:

Whŏ will | bĕliĕve | mŷ vĕrse | ĭn tĭme | tŏ cōme

Whŏ will | bĕliĕve | mŷ vĕrse | ĭn tĭme | tŏ cōme

sometimes it is only the ictus shown:

Who will | believe | my verse | in time | to come

and at other times the pipe symbol separating the metrical feet may not be shown at all:

Who will believe my verse in time to come

There are others such as used by Lanthan (a symbolic indication for a formula of sorts) and Mayor (numerically indicating the emphasis of the ictus). The choice is up to the person performing the scansion. It should also be noted that the impression of the ictus is not necessarily the same in each place it occurs if using the single ictus. More than one ictus may be used to indicate emphasis or strength in a verse. For example, a reader may place more emphasis on *will* than *believe*:

Who wĭll believe &c.

As we may assume, the scansion will depend upon the reading. Added to this, different readers may read the verse in another way. What we can often find is that the scansion becomes very complex, but

there is little to be gained by complicating the matter. The example of scansion that follows will use the breve and single ictus.

## From Milton's "Paradise Regained"

If we consider an example from Milton's **Paradise Regained** (iv, 270), we can see how different scansions produce different readings, and in some instances incorrectly.

Thence to the famous Orators repair,  
Those antient, whose resistless eloquence  
Wielded at will that fierce Democratie,  
**Shook the Arsenal, and fulmin'd over Greece, 270**  
To Macedon, and Artaxerxes Throne;

(Taken from **The Poetical Works of John Milton**, 1908 OUP)

Since this work is written in *blank verse*, one may be expecting *iambic pentameter* controlling the rhythm. Although this is a fair assumption, it is unlikely that every verse will necessarily keep this rhythm. If we attempt to force this verse into strict iambic pentameter, we find that the verse does not conform:

Shöök thé | Ārsé | nāl ánd | fülmi'd | övér | Grēece /?/

Notice that both speech stress and metrical accent do not align at any point and the verse appears to be terminally hypermetrical, which is not correct. A similar problem occurs when using the *amphibrach* if we are determined to maintain five feet.

Shöök thé | Ārsé | nāl ánd | fülmi'd | övér Grēece

As an aid for the scansion, it can be easier to consider the syllables in the verse. In relation to the previous verse (269), **Shook** clearly holds the ictus indicating a greater emphasis for the start of the verse. This in turn removes the impression on **the**. The remainder of the verse may then be represented as:

Shóok thě Ār sě nāl ānd fúl mī'd ó věr Grēece

We can clearly see there are five stresses in the verse, even with casual reading. This scansion may satisfy some:

Shóok thě Ārsēnāl ānd fúlmi'd óvēr Grēece

The task now is to determine the metrical feet; this may or may not be of interest. It all depends on the purpose for the scansion. One possibility is:

Shóok thě | Ārsēnāl | ānd fúl | mī'd ó | věr Grēece

Here we have five metrical feet: trochee, dactyl, iamb, iamb and iamb. The presence of the dactyl may be of some concern. Its position after the trochee is in with keeping the falling rhythm, but there is some difficulty recovering the rhythm into the last three iambs which maintain a rising rhythm. In general, blank verse will be predominately rising. It appears that the dactyl disrupts the rhythm of this verse.

A more careful reading indicates a necessary pause after **Arsenal**. This is of course the medial caesura:

Shóok thě | Ársěnál § and fúl | mǐ'd ó | vě Gréece

The presence of the iambs in the last three feet does not cause any issue with the terminal part of the verse. The problem lies in the first two feet as we have them, more so surrounding **Arsenal**. The last two syllables of **Arsenal** are of interest due to the time they occupy in their sounding.

One important fact we have only touched on is the continuance from verse 269 when reading. Clearly, we do not carry immediately from **Democratie** to **Shook**. The ending comma would suggest a minor pause for the start of verse 270. Thus, we have a clipped iamb (headless) or acephalous verse:

^ Shóok | thě Ársěnál § and fúl | mǐ'd ó | vě Gréece

The question now is the relevance of the apparent four-syllable foot. The presence of the caesura would indicate that this second foot cannot be *secundus paeon*. We do note that the second and third syllables of **Arsenal**, light and flow quickly to fill the caesural pause. Thus:

^ Shóok | thě Ár(senal § and fúl | mǐ'd ó | vě Gréece

rendering the last two syllables of **Arsenal** hypermetrical. We now see the best representation for the reading of this verse and the adherence to the rising rhythm of its iambicity since hypermetrical syllables are not included in the scansion. Although earlier combinations may seem appropriate for analysis, we must consider the way the verse is to be read. It is very difficult, if not absurd, to scan one way and read another. More importantly, how does the verse follow from the previous verse. In some instances, the number of syllables in a metrical foot is irrelevant and is governed by the time occupied by the syllables with the ictus falling at constant intervals.

For most, this would appear to be a very time-consuming academic exercise. However, the result is greatly welcome when the proper reading of a verse is found in the scansion. Some verses are more difficult to scan than others, but ultimately, we do find out *why verses are as they are and not otherwise*.